

# WITTGENSTEINIAN FIDEISM AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN POST-WAR BRITISH PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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## Synopsis

The intention of this dissertation is to provide a descriptive account of the changes that occurred in British philosophy of religion after it began to be influenced by the so-called 'revolution in philosophy' in the nineteenth fifties. This had produced a reinvigoration of empiricism in mainstream philosophy in the early decades of the twentieth century, and had led to an interest in the nature and status of the meaning of language, and the means by which this meaning could be justified. This debate entered the philosophy of religion in the form of the verification principle, which denied meaning to any language which could not demonstrate how it was to be verified. Some philosophers were then criticised for allegedly utilising the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and claiming that religion was what he meant by a language-game or a form of life, and that meant religious belief could only be criticised by criteria that arose within the same language-game or form of life, so denying validity to any criterion that attempted to adjudicate meaning in all forms of discourse. The work of the philosopher most often associated with this position, D.Z. Phillips, will be discussed, and an argument made that this is an inadequate characterisation of his work. An account will then be given of what Wittgenstein himself understood by the terms, language-game and form of life, and that in fact this possible interpretation raises the possibility that what is signified by these terms may have the unavoidable effect of opening up religious language to criticism of a kind related to the empiricist critique, rather than closing it off.

I, Adrian Souter, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately sixty thousand words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in October 1991 and as a candidate for the degree of Master of Philosophy in September 1992; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St.Andrews between 1991 and 1992.

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Master of Philosophy in the University of St.Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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## Chapter One

In Britain, the nineteen fifties are not generally regarded as a decade of innovation or radical change. They are usually perceived in cultural terms as the calm before the storm of the nineteen sixties. However, in one intellectual backwater, the nineteen fifties proved to be a decade of irreversible change. This was the philosophy of religion, and it came about, because it was in that decade that the so-called 'revolution in philosophy', that had been taking place since the beginning of the century, finally penetrated into this intellectual stream. This 'revolution in philosophy' was the result of the re-emergence of the British empiricist tradition that had been submerged in the mid-nineteenth century by the dominance of Idealism. This re-emergence was the result of the dissatisfaction of such philosophers as Bertrand Russell (1874-1970) and G.E. Moore (1873-1958) with the Absolute Idealism of their tutors at Cambridge, and which resulted in a rejection of speculative metaphysics, at least in an Idealist form, and the espousal of a new philosophical method - analysis - as it was now taken to be a necessary step to determine how the propositions or statements that make up our language had meaning, before attempting anything as grand as the metaphysical flights of fancy the Idealists had attempted.

It has been claimed that a shadowy, but potent, influence on this revolution was the German philosopher of mathematics, Gottlob Frege (1848-1925). In the view of Michael Dummett, the major British commentator on Frege<sup>1</sup>, before Descartes, "it can hardly be said that any one part of philosophy was recognised as being ... fundamental to the rest". Descartes is significant as the founder of 'modern' philosophy, precisely because he did raise the question of "whether there is a part of philosophy that is in this way prior to any other", i.e. whether "philosophy has a foundation":

... the Cartesian revolution consisted in giving this role to the theory of knowledge. Descartes made the question, 'What do we know, and what justifies our claim to this knowledge?' the starting point of all philosophy : and despite the conflicting views of the various schools, it was accepted as the starting-point for more than two centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Frege's importance consisted in the fact that "he totally ignored the Cartesian

tradition", not because he ignored questions of justification, but because he believed such questions could only arise, "once we have achieved a successful analysis of the meanings of the expressions with which we are concerned". Now, all previous philosophers had of course been interested in some way in the analysis of meaning:

... but Frege was the first ... to make a sharp separation between this task and the later one of establishing what is true and what our grounds are for accepting it; and perhaps the first to indicate clearly the difficulty of achieving a satisfactory analysis of meaning. Someone who accepted Descartes's perspective according to which epistemology is the starting-point of all philosophy might impatiently concede that it was advisable, before undertaking any discussion, first to agree about the meanings of any possible ambiguous terms, but regard this as a mere preliminary to a philosophical enquiry rather than as part of one. Only when it is clearly grasped how hard it can be to attain an adequate analysis of the meaning of an expression having the kind of generality or depth that makes it of interest to philosophers, can the analysis of meaning be seen as a primary task of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

The reason why it can be so difficult to attain such an analysis is because of the way we come to learn and understand language by a gradual process. It is only when our mastery of language is already far advanced that we are able to extend our vocabulary by adding words "of which verbal explanations or actual definitions can be given", so that for much of our language, analysis will in fact be "an attempt to reverse the process, and ... to make explicit what had been only implicit in the learning process":

The deeper it goes, the more it is concerned with levels of language at which verbal explanation plays a minimal part in the introduction of expressions; at which we acquired an understanding of expressions by learning in practice to employ them, rather than by being told how to use them.<sup>4</sup>

This means that such 'deep' analysis will necessitate having "a correct model of the way in which language functions", because if "we are concerned to analyse terms which we are not accustomed to define, or which are incapable of definition because their use is presupposed by any expressions by means of which a definition might be given, then we require, in order to know the form which an analysis must take, to appeal to some general model of meaning"<sup>5</sup>. It is because of this that in Frege's philosophy the theory of meaning becomes the foundation of all else, because if we

are to understand any expression, we need "a model for what the understanding of an expression consists in"<sup>6</sup>. Previously, philosophers had only been concerned with meaning in the sense that, for example, "an investigation of the meaning of the expression 'natural number' precedes an enquiry into the basis of the laws concerning natural numbers", while Frege started from meaning "by taking the theory of meaning as the only part of philosophy whose results do not depend upon those of any other part, but which underlies all the rest":

By doing this, he effected a revolution in philosophy as great as the similar revolution previously effected by Descartes; and he was able to do this even though there was only one other part of philosophy (i.e. the philosophy of mathematics) to which Frege applied the results he obtained in the theory of meaning. We can, therefore, date a whole epoch in philosophy as beginning with the work of Frege, just as we can do with Descartes.<sup>7</sup>

This 'new epoch' became joined with the reaction against Idealism in Britain through the work of the philosopher who completes the triumvirate who stand as the first generation of British analytic philosophy - Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1889-1951) came from one of the wealthiest industrial families in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and became interested in philosophy by a roundabout route<sup>8</sup>. Not being considered intellectually gifted by his family, he was encouraged to a 'practical' vocation and studied engineering at the technical university in Berlin, where he became interested in aeronautics, to which end he went on to post-graduate study at Manchester University. While there, however, he developed an interest in the philosophical problems underlying the mathematics in his work, and after encountering the work of Frege, he went to see him at Jena. For unclear reasons, Frege advised Wittgenstein to go to Cambridge to study under Russell, whose work on the foundation of mathematics he considered to be related to his. So in 1912, Wittgenstein arrived at Cambridge, and in less than two years, he had impressed Russell and Moore so much so that it became uncertain who was supposed to be the teacher and who the pupil. However, with the outbreak of the First World War, Wittgenstein returned to Vienna, and through being on the opposite side from his new philosophical colleagues, was cut off from the intellectual stimulus of Cambridge. Yet it was during this period that he wrote what was to be published in 1922 as the *Tractatus Logico-*



*Philosophicus*, the book that made his name in the philosophical world, and which was to be the only substantial publication he produced in his life time. It was through this book that Frege's understanding of the theory of meaning as the foundation of the philosophical enterprise was to be communicated beyond the boundaries of the philosophy of mathematics, where Frege had been content to keep it.

However, before outlining the significance of the *Tractatus*, it is necessary to point out that while Frege may have instituted a 'revolution' against Descartes, his method of philosophy was still analogous to the Frenchman's in that both were convinced of the necessity to give philosophy a secure foundation. In recent decades, there has been a reaction against what has been termed 'foundationalism', which has been defined as "the theory that knowledge of the world rests on a foundation of indubitable beliefs from which further propositions can be inferred to produce a superstructure of known truths". Usually, this has meant that beliefs about sense experience have been taken to form the foundation, and the beliefs about the external world inferred from sense experience are seen as making up the superstructure<sup>9</sup>. As this definition suggests, it has been a project that has particularly appealed to empiricists, and reveals their deep debt to Descartes. While Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* implies that all one can be truly certain of is the 'substance' that does the thinking, it is a corollary of this that it is our sense experience of the external world, that this 'substance' thinks it is experiencing, that we can believe with far more surety than we can the existence of the external world itself, which this sense experience is supposed to be produced by. This emphasis on direct knowledge of sense experience or sense data through which we gain our indirect knowledge of the external world has been a characteristic of empiricism from its 'classical' expression in Locke and Hume through to its re-emergence in Moore and Russell and their successors. However, this shows the paradox at the heart of empiricism, as while it has always presented itself as the philosophy most suited to a scientific age, as it will only accept phenomena that can either be confirmed by, or extrapolated from, sense data, its very dependence on sense experience means it has an ambiguous relationship with Idealism.

This is because if sense experience lies at the foundation of what the empiricist



says about the world, then the empiricist is always dependent upon that which perceives the sense experience, so that the 'mind', however it may be understood, plays a vital role as that which receives the sense data and processes them into the 'superstructure' of beliefs about the external world. Therefore empiricism can always face the problem of sliding over into Idealism. To take two brief definitions of Idealism - that it is the claim "that what is real is in some way confined to or at least related to the contents of our minds", or that "there is no access to reality apart from what the mind provides us with, and further that the mind can provide and reveal to us only its own contents"<sup>10</sup> - it is obviously also true of empiricism that what is 'real' - the sense data - can only be known through being related to the 'contents' of our minds, our perception of such sense data, and that therefore we have no access to 'reality' unless it is mediated by our minds. Part of the significance of Frege's work was that beginning in the philosophy of mathematics, and the understanding of logic that underlay it, he decisively rejected this 'psychologism' that both Idealism and empiricism accepted. For instance, the last representative of 'classical' British empiricism, John Stuart Mill, considered logic and mathematics to be generalizations constructed from experience, a position he had come to in reaction to the 'intuitionism' of his Idealist-influenced contemporaries, who while defending the necessity of logical and mathematical truths, which Mill's position could not accept, located the necessity in the structures inherent in the 'mind'.

Frege rejected both positions, and attempted to advance a kind of 'realism', whereby he took the propositions of logic and mathematics to be referring to a distinct kind of 'reality' that gave such propositions their meaning. This 'reality' was of a peculiar kind, being objective, but not part of the spatio-temporal world, which has often led to Frege's position being termed Platonist. However, it is not necessary to pursue this further, but merely to point out that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein appears to develop a theory of meaning for all of human language that similarly attempts to exclude 'psychologism', so extending the work Frege did in the philosophy of mathematics into philosophy in general. To this end, he attempted to explain how language had meaning in relation to the world, in a way that avoided the dependency on mind that both empiricism and Idealism were prey to, so trying to reject the

'private' data of our consciousness as the starting point for epistemology which had previously been the case. In the *Tractatus*<sup>11</sup>, the world is described as the 'totality' of facts (§ 1.1), and a fact is a 'state of affairs' (§ 2). These 'states of affairs' are made up of 'objects' (§ 2.01), and the entire basis of meaning in language in the *Tractatus* is that it is possible to 'picture' such 'states of affairs' to ourselves (§ 2.1ff). These 'pictures' are themselves made up of 'elements' and these 'elements' represent the 'objects' in the 'state of affairs' (§ 2.131), and this is possible because the picture has a 'logico-pictorial form' in common with what it depicts (§ 2.2). Wittgenstein goes on to claim that these 'logical pictures' of 'states of affairs' are 'thoughts' (§ 3), however he deals with this only briefly, seeming to imply that it is impossible for 'thoughts' to be true *a priori*, i.e. that they can only be true if they correspond to 'states of affairs', unless their "truth were recognizable from the thought itself (without anything to compare it with)" (§ 3.05), which presumably means unless they are tautologous. In fact, in the case of our 'thoughts' about logic and mathematics, which he accepted had to be *a priori* to any knowledge about the world, he believed they had meaning in this way precisely because they were tautologies.

However, the basis of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning for all other forms of 'thought' is that such 'thoughts' and the 'states of affairs' they picture can be expressed and "perceived by the senses" in propositions (§ 3.1). Such propositions are made up of 'names' (§ 3.202), and these 'names' correspond to the 'objects' that make up 'states of affairs' (§ 3.21), so that the proposition, like the 'thought', is 'a picture of reality' (§ 4.01). A 'name' does not 'picture' the 'object' it refers to, as both these entities are 'simples' (§ 2.02ff), that is, according to the analysis Wittgenstein is advocating, one cannot find anything more basic than these in propositions or in the 'reality' the propositions represent. Instead it is the collection of 'names' that make up the 'proposition' that 'pictures' the 'state of affairs', which is made up of the 'objects' the 'names' correspond with. A proposition is only meaningful if it can be analyzed in this way, and this is of course distinct from the question of its truth or falsity, which depends on there actually being 'objects' for the 'names' to correspond to. Meaningfulness is therefore dependent on the ability of 'thought' and propositions to 'picture' the 'states of affairs' that make up 'reality', and

this is possible only because of what Wittgenstein had previously termed 'logico-pictorial form', but which now becomes simply 'logical form' (§ 4.12ff) This is what propositions "must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it". Unfortunately, Wittgenstein does not get any more specific than this, as he claims that 'logical form' cannot itself be represented, because "(in) order to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world". Instead he claims that 'logical form' is mirrored in propositions:

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by means of language.

Propositions *show* the logical form of reality.

They display it. (§ 4.121)

This was an example of a distinction Wittgenstein made in the *Tractatus* between two kinds of language - one which had 'sense', and the other which was 'nonsense'. Propositions had *sense*, if what they wanted to picture could be 'said', i.e. if it was theoretically possible to analyze all the 'names' in the proposition into their corresponding 'objects' in the 'state of affairs'. However, if a proposition was *nonsense*, it was not possible to perform such an analysis, as one could not determine what the 'simples' would be in such a case. So it was *nonsense*, because in analytic terms, it was trying to *say* what could not be *said*. However, Wittgenstein claimed that in such circumstances it was possible that such language could *show* something instead. This was the case with 'logical form', which propositions were able to *show*. As he had put it earlier at § 4.022, "A proposition *shows* how things stand *if* it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand". So 'logical form' is what enables one to speak meaningfully about the world, as it is responsible for language being able to represent 'reality', but it cannot itself be represented, and so paradoxically the language about it is presumably not meaningful. It is here that Wittgenstein shows that while he may have begun under Frege's inspiration, he has moved into a world rather different from his. This becomes even clearer if one attempts to find out something more about the two 'simples' - 'names' and 'objects' - which Wittgenstein claims language and 'reality' can be broken down into, and from which all we say and the world around

us are made up. As these 'simples' cannot themselves be 'pictured', this suggests they are part of what can be *shown* but not *said*, and this suspicion is confirmed if one looks in the *Tractatus* for concrete examples of particular 'names' or 'objects'. One cannot isolate a 'name' by simply looking at one's everyday use of propositions. It needs a great deal of imagination for most propositions to be regarded as 'pictures' in any familiar sense of that term. However, Wittgenstein does not believe this causes too much trouble for his position, as he believes the propositions he has in mind are not the ones that make up our everyday use of language. Rather he has in mind propositions which it is the job of philosophy to find - he claims philosophy is the activity whereby our everyday propositions are analyzed into 'elementary' propositions (§ 4.21ff), and "(it) is only in the nexus of an elementary proposition that a name occurs in a proposition" (§ 4.23).

However, this does not really make matter less obscure because Wittgenstein also provides no criteria by which to identify 'elementary' propositions. So that one seems to be caught in the curious circularity that one could only know what a 'simple' was, whether a 'name' or 'object', because it was supposedly possible to analyze our language into 'elementary' propositions, but it was only possible to analyze ordinary propositions into 'elementary' ones, if one already had some conception of what 'simples' were, which are of course what 'elementary' propositions are supposed to be made up from. However, it is plain from the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein was still not unduly troubled by this, and if one turns to the surviving notebooks from which he worked up the *Tractatus* it becomes obvious why, as he there bluntly states that the existence of 'simples' is a 'logical necessity':

It seems that the idea of the *simple* is already contained in that of the complex and in the idea of analysis, and in such a way that we come to this idea quite apart from any examples of simple objects, or of propositions which mention them, and we realize the existence of the simple object - *a priori* - as a logical necessity.

So it looks as if the existence of the simple objects is related to that of the complex ones as the sense of not-*p* is to the sense of *p*: the *simple* object is *presupposed* in the complex.<sup>12</sup>

For Wittgenstein, the existence of 'simples' had to be a 'logical necessity', because during the period he was writing the *Tractatus*, he believed that the only real sense

a proposition could have was a *definite* sense. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein believed that vague sense in regard to a proposition was an absurdity - "A proposition must determine reality one way or another: yes or no" (§ 4.023), and so "(the) requirement that simple signs be possible *is* the requirement that sense be definite" (§3.23). It seems he may have come to this view under Frege's influence, and the idea does certainly appear at an early stage in the preparatory notebooks:

*And it keeps on forcing itself upon us that there is some simple indivisible, an element of being, in brief a thing. It does not go against our feeling, that we cannot analyse propositions so far as to mention the elements by name; no, we feel that the world must consist of elements. And it appears as if that were identical with the proposition that the world must be what it is, it must be definite.*<sup>13</sup>

Much later, after he had abandoned the philosophy outlined in the *Tractatus*, one of his pupils also asked him directly, if he had ever decided what an example of a 'simple object' would be, and he apparently said, "that at the time his thought had been that he was a *logician*; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely *empirical* matter!" According to this former pupil, Wittgenstein now "regarded his former opinion as absurd"<sup>14</sup>.

Yet even at the time, according to the understanding of 'logical form' set out in the *Tractatus*, such 'simples', through being integral to what Wittgenstein meant by 'logical form', would in some respect be 'absurd'. They were something that would fall under the latter pole of Wittgenstein's distinction between what could be said and what could be shown. At the end of the *Tractatus*, he made a claim that can only be taken as casting doubt on the entire 'realist' ontology he had outlined:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (§ 6.54)

It seems that while Wittgenstein may have begun the *Tractatus* as an attempt to extend the sort of ontology Frege had developed to give mathematics meaning, to all other meaningful language, in the process he had begun to recognise the difficulty of this,



and this was because he had come to realise the problems that faced any form of metaphysical philosophy. In the section preceding the one quoted above (§ 6.53), he had already claimed that the only 'correct' method in philosophy would be "to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy - and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions". It is clear that Wittgenstein believed that in the *Tractatus* he had failed to follow the "strictly correct" method and had been indulging in metaphysics, and so strictly nonsense, because he was trying to say something that could not be said with any definite meaning. However, it seems he was happy to accept that what he was doing was an imperfect attempt to *show* something about the world, and that metaphysics was in good company, as he had already claimed that all religious and moral language was strictly meaningless, because it dealt with value, and "(if) there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case". His position appears to be that value cannot be "accidental", as is all that happens in the world, and if it is "non-accidental", then it "cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental", so "(it) must lie outside the world" (§ 6.41). But the problem is that the only meaningful propositions are those that tell us about what goes on within the world, so that "Propositions can express nothing of what is higher" (§ 6.42). It therefore seems that the talk of simples Wittgenstein felt himself forced to because of the demand for definite sense, he himself came to believe paradoxically had exceeded the bounds of definite sense, and was itself to be located outwith the world of meaningful language, which it was of course supposed to be holding in place.

The ambiguity of Wittgenstein's position is further complicated when it is realised that the *Tractatus* explicitly denied a realistic status to the propositions of logic and mathematics, which had been the entire point of Frege's own 'revolution' in philosophy. Instead, Wittgenstein had argued that logic and mathematics were only 'meaningful' because they were tautologous<sup>15</sup>, and had so in effect returned to one of the positions that Frege had himself been reacting against - 'formalism' - which had reduced both to the manipulation of signs, denying that there was any ontological

referent for these signs to refer to. However, the significance of Wittgenstein was that he introduced to the main stream of philosophy Frege's insistence that a theory of meaning needed to be the foundation of all philosophical activity. He was certainly a major influence on the formulators of the most widely known criterion developed by the re-invigorated empiricists to determine the meaningfulness or otherwise of language. This was the Verification Principle of the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers of science centred around Moritz Schlick (1882-1936), a professor at the University of Vienna, who had returned to empiricism in the belief it would be a firm philosophical basis for science, and had assumed that the *Tractatus* was an allied attempt to their endeavours. In the late 'twenties, Wittgenstein and various members of the Circle had a series of discussions<sup>16</sup>, but it seems that it was not until much later that it became clear to both sides just how different their positions were, a situation complicated by the fact that Wittgenstein was beginning to move to a virtually complete rejection of the views he had put forward in the *Tractatus*. However, at the time, both sides had inherited from Frege a belief in the need for analysis - that our everyday language was hopelessly ambiguous, and if we were to see clearly what uses were meaningful, then some kind of criteria were needed by which to iron out these ambiguities.

The ideas of the Logical Positivists (or Logical Empiricists), as the Vienna Circle became known, were introduced into Britain by A.J. Ayer (1910-1989), who had studied with members of the Circle in the early 'thirties. It was his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, first published in 1936, that popularized Logical Positivism in the English-speaking world. In the first edition, Ayer had declared that "(the) views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume"<sup>17</sup>. While he did not deny this in the second edition of 1946, Ayer did many years later come to realise that things were not really as straight forward as he had thought<sup>18</sup>. He admitted that when he first read the *Tractatus* in 1931, "it made an overwhelming impression on me", but since then he had "come to find much of it obscure and to disagree on many points with what it appears to be saying", but that back in 1931, "I ... took what I wanted from it and did

not mind the rest"<sup>19</sup>. He points out that what he and the other Positivists took from it was "that the elementary propositions of the *Tractatus* were descriptions of sense-experience":

The objects which they signified were what Russell and Moore had made it fashionable to call sense-data; their configurations made up the structure of sense-fields. The result was that Wittgenstein was credited with a philosophical standpoint hardly differing from Hume's. His state of affairs, whether simple or compound, corresponded to Hume's matters of fact; his tautologies and identities expressed Hume's relations of ideas.<sup>20</sup>

So, according to Ayer, he and the Vienna Circle had interpreted the *Tractatus* through the spectacles of 'classical' empiricism, so missing the fact that part of Wittgenstein's motivation in developing his admittedly ambiguous ideas was to overcome the tendency towards Idealism that tended to result from trying to base knowledge on sense-data. Instead, as Russell had done in his introduction to the *Tractatus* and in the philosophy of 'logical atomism' he had developed in reaction to Wittgenstein, they had managed to convince themselves that Wittgenstein's talk of simple objects and the analysis of language into elementary propositions was meant to refer to the contents of sense-experience, and not in fact the quasi-realist ontology he in fact seems to have been trying to display.

Therefore, despite the impetus Wittgenstein gave to the development of the Logical Positivist position, his own ideas even at this stage in his philosophical development were very different from what the Positivists were trying to formulate. They took his remarks about 'metaphysics' being nonsense at their face value, and failed to notice that he thought one could come out with significant nonsense as he had tried to do in the *Tractatus*. They were not only misled by seeing Wittgenstein in a Humean light, but they also, to some extent correctly, believed that the *Tractatus* supported an important distinction they had adopted from the 'critical' Idealism of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). As a corollary to their strict insistence that the only valid knowledge had to derive from sense-experience, they insisted that statements to be meaningful had to fall into two categories - the analytic and the synthetic. The analytic was effectively what Wittgenstein had meant by describing statements as tautologous, and this was certainly one of the most important attractions of the *Tractatus* for the



Positivists. The main examples of analytic statements were those of mathematics and logic, and both Wittgenstein and the Positivists accepted that the truth or falsity of such statements derived solely from the grammatical rules governing the combination of the words, or signs, used to make them. This meant that such statements either had to be necessarily true, or contradictions, and that they were known to be such *a priori*, i.e. they were known to be true, or contradictory, independently of any particular sense experience. This meant that such statements could not be factually informative, because they were not about states of affairs in the world. Instead their purpose was to elaborate the use of words and other signs, including numbers, and to express the way words and numbers must necessarily relate to one another if they are to be used meaningfully.

However, the Positivists' attack on metaphysics revolved around the other kind of statement they accepted as meaningful - the synthetic. While analytic statements by the very nature of the terms they used had to be necessarily true or contradictory, with synthetic statements the situation was very different as their truth or falsity could only be judged *a posteriori*, i.e. they could only be judged true or false through sense experience, which also meant that they were factually informative as they were supposed to be about states of affairs in the world. Now the Positivists claimed that the metaphysical statements that philosophers had previously been led into fitted into neither of their two categories, and that therefore their claims to speak about 'realities' beyond sense-experience were pseudo-synthetic. Such pseudo-synthetic statements were grammatically similar to genuine ones, and also appeared to be offering information about states of affairs in the world, and this was why the Positivists introduced the verification principle as a way of distinguishing between 'genuine' synthetic and pseudo-synthetic statements. The purpose of the principle was to try to reveal which statements were 'meaningful' and which were 'meaningless' in the distinct sense that Positivists attached to these terms. For them, a statement was empirically or factually *meaningful* if it could be shown to be genuinely synthetic, i.e. that it could be shown to be making claims about states of affairs that could then be shown to be true or false, whereas a statement was empirically or factually *meaningless* if it was shown to be pseudo-synthetic, because the state of affairs it

appeared to be making claims about could not be shown to be either true or false.

So, in his *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer distinguished between a 'strong' and a 'weak' sense of verification:

A proposition is said to be verifiable, in the strong sense of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established in experience. But it is verifiable, in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable.<sup>21</sup>

He argues that the 'strong' sense would be far too restrictive, as it would rule out what he terms "general propositions of law", such as "Arsenic is poisonous", "All men are mortal", and "A body tends to expand when it is heated":

It is of the very nature of these propositions that their truth cannot be established with certainty by any finite series of observations. But if it is recognised that such general propositions of law are designed to cover an infinite number of cases, then it must be admitted that they cannot, even in principle, be verified conclusively.<sup>22</sup>

As he is not willing to rule such propositions out as pseudo-synthetic, Ayer feels that the sensible Positivist should be willing to accept the 'weaker' variant instead, whereby one asks the putative statement of fact not the 'strong' question of "Would any observations make its truth or falsehood logically certain?", but "Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood?". According to Ayer, it is only if a negative answer has to be given to the second question that a statement can be seen as meaningless. The kind of observations he has in mind are brought out when he reformulates the 'weak' version of the verification principle:

Let us call a proposition which records an actual or possible observation an experiential proposition. Then we may say that it is the mark of a genuine factual proposition, not that it should be equivalent to an experiential proposition, or any finite number of experiential propositions, but simply that some experiential propositions can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from those other premises alone.<sup>23</sup>

In the introduction to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer refines this formulation further by replacing 'experiential proposition' with the term 'observation-statement', and so putting forward a new 'simple' definition of 'weak' verifiability as being that a statement is meaningful "if some observation-statement can

be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises, without being deducible from those other premises alone"<sup>24</sup>. However, he goes on to admit that most empirical propositions are "in some degree vague", which he had failed to acknowledge in the first edition, so that in verification it is impossible to specify "the occurrence of precisely this or precisely that sense-content, but only the occurrence of one or other of the sense-contents that fall within a fairly indefinite range". So that he is forced to admit that while the meaningfulness of statements still depends on "making observations which consist in the occurrence of particular sense-contents", there are in fact "an indefinite number of other tests, differing to some extent in respect either of their conditions or their results, that would have served the same purpose", so that "there is never any set of observation-statements of which it can truly be said that precisely they are entailed by any given statement about a material thing"<sup>25</sup>. Despite the growing complexity of the qualifications he has to make, Ayer still insists that this does not undermine his basic claim that "every significant statement about a material thing can be represented as entailing a disjunction of observation-statements". Though as "the terms of this disjunction, being infinite" cannot be definitively enumerated, vagueness should not be a problem so long as "it is understood that when we speak of the 'entailment' of observation-statements, what we are considering to be deducible from the premises in question is not any particular observation-statement, but only one or other of a set of such statements, where the defining characteristic of the set is that all its members refer to sense-contents that fall within a certain specifiable range"<sup>26</sup>. This means that Ayer now has to finally put his new formulation of the verification principle into the more complex definition, whereby -

a statement is directly verifiable if it is either itself an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone ... (while) a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as indirectly verifiable.<sup>27</sup>

One of the main reasons for the failure of the verification principle was this continual need to reformulate it, because it was found either to exclude some form of language which someone in the Positivist camp wished to accord meaning to, or because it was discovered that a particular formulation in fact did not exclude another form of language somebody else wished to exclude from meaningfulness. Criticisms were also made at the way the Positivists seemed to have taken Wittgenstein at his word in the *Tractatus*, when he said that the only meaningful statements (those that truly said what could only be said) were the statements of natural science, as many Positivists seemed intent on reconstructing all meaningful language on the model of the statements of empirical science. Ayer, for instance, was quite blunt "that all propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses; and that the function of an empirical hypothesis is to provide a rule for the anticipation of experience"<sup>28</sup>. After all, his talk about statements needing to entail one or more observation-statements to be meaningful basically meant that they needed to be predictive like successful scientific hypotheses were. Later on in *Language, Truth and Logic*, the relationship between empirical and scientific propositions is refined further, when he discusses the 'validity' of the former group of propositions, by which term he means how they are to be shown to be true<sup>29</sup>. Ayer's position seems to be that the validity of all empirical propositions will be demonstrable in the same way, because they are all examples of hypotheses, and so we determine the validity of such propositions in exactly the same manner as we do the hypotheses of science. Ayer seems to privilege scientific propositions above all other kinds of empirical propositions, and then reads back the characteristics of scientific hypotheses into all other statements about states of affairs in the world. So in determining the validity of empirical statements, one should ask, "What are the considerations that determine in any given situation which of the relevant hypotheses shall be preserved and which shall be abandoned?". And for Ayer, the answer is the same for all kinds of hypotheses - they "are designed to enable us to anticipate the course of our sensations":

The function of a system of hypotheses is to warn us beforehand what will be our experience in a certain field - to enable us to make accurate predictions. The hypotheses may therefore be described as rules which govern our expectation of future experience. There is no need to say why we require such rules. It is plain that on our ability to make successful predictions depends the satisfaction of even our

simplest desires, including the desire to survive.<sup>30</sup>

So Ayer answer his question, "What is the criterion by which we test the validity of an empirical proposition?", with the claim that we do so "by seeing whether it actually fulfils the function which it is designed to fulfil", and this function is "to enable us to anticipate experience". So the criteria for validity flow from the same source as those for meaningfulness - in both cases, it is because the meaningful and the true statements we use will entail certain consequences which can be observed:

... if an observation to which a given proposition is relevant conforms to our expectations, the truth of that proposition is confirmed. One cannot say that the proposition has been proved absolutely valid, because it is still possible that a future observation will discredit it. But one can say that its probability has been increased. If the observation is contrary to our expectations, then the status of the proposition is jeopardised. We may preserve it by adopting or abandoning other hypotheses: or we may consider it to have been confuted. But even if it is rejected in consequence of an unfavourable observation, one cannot say that it had been invalidated absolutely. For it is still possible that future observations will lead us to reinstate it.

One can say only that its probability has been diminished.<sup>31</sup>

If this is so, and therefore "(every) synthetic proposition is a rule for the anticipation of future experience", and can only be "distinguished in content from other synthetic propositions by the fact that it is relevant to different situations"<sup>32</sup>, this has the result that the status of empirical propositions only varies in regard to their degree of probability, because of the differences in the ability to verify them in different situations. However, this means that no empirical proposition can be held with absolute certainty, as the most that can be said of any proposition is that it is more probable in a particular situation than another would be, so that Ayer appears to have opened up the possibility of scepticism about any and every statement about the world, and therefore left open the kind of entry point for Idealism that Wittgenstein was trying to close off in his *Tractatus*.

The position that is generally portrayed as the most important empiricist alternative to verification as a way of demonstrating which synthetic propositions were to be taken as meaningful was the idea of falsification advanced by Karl Popper



(1902-1994), in his book, *Logik der Forschung*, which appeared in 1934, but which despite its great influence was not translated into English until 1959<sup>33</sup>. Popper's basic quarrel with verification was that he recognised that while he and the Vienna Circle followed Hume in being sceptical about the possibility of induction (i.e. inferring from a group of particular statements to a general law about them), he felt that they had not come up with a viable alternative, and so they threatened to undermine the entire basis of the scientific methodology they were trying to secure. While Ayer had claimed it was possible to verify what he termed a "general proposition of law" with some degree of probability through its predictive usefulness, Popper instead insisted that it was impossible to verify or confirm such a "general proposition" as a universal scientific theory with any positive degree of probability, but that it was possible to disprove such a universal theory with certainty. This was because while with verification as Ayer had recognised no number of observations in conformity with the hypothesis could conclusively prove it, with falsification Popper claimed just one contradictory observation would refute it. Popper was also uncomfortable at the way his "falsification principle" was set up as an alternative theory of meaning to the verification principle, as he was rather more modest in his intentions than the Logical Positivists. He claimed not to be interested in declaring propositions that failed the falsification test meaningless, but that he wanted to find a criterion by which to identify genuinely scientific statements from 'pseudo-scientific' ones, without implying that such statements were therefore automatically meaningless. Popper insisted that he was simply interested in "the problem of demarcation", which was "finding a criterion which would enable us to distinguish between the empirical sciences on the one hand, and mathematics and logic as well as 'metaphysical' systems on the other"<sup>34</sup>.

Popper believed the Positivists had treated this problem of demarcation as though it was "a problem of natural science", whereby they tried "to discover a difference, existing in the nature of things, as it were, between empirical science on the one hand and metaphysics on the other", instead of recognising that their task should be "to propose a suitable convention" for distinguishing between two kinds of proposition<sup>35</sup>. He therefore thought they were still trying to make metaphysical assumptions that their other reductionist assumptions ruled out. For instance, Popper's

problem with the kind of analysis propounded by Wittgenstein (who he seems to have interpreted as a 'straight' empiricist like his acquaintances in the Vienna Circle) was that it meant that "every meaningful proposition must be *logically reducible* to elementary (or atomic) propositions" (which Popper therefore interpreted as descriptions of sense-experience)<sup>36</sup>. He took Wittgenstein to be making fundamentally the same claim as the older empiricists' that the only legitimate 'scientific' concepts were those "derived from experience ... that is, which they believed to be logically reducible to elements of sense-experience"<sup>37</sup>. The problem with both positions is that they required induction to be valid, but in the case of Wittgenstein and the Positivists, their own criteria of meaningfulness made the status of such "general propositions of law" dubious if they were to be reached by induction:

... positivists, in their anxiety to annihilate metaphysics, annihilate natural science along with it. For scientific laws, too, cannot be logically reduced to elementary statements of experience. If consistently applied, Wittgenstein's criterion of meaningfulness rejects as meaningless those natural laws the search for which, as Einstein says, is 'the supreme task of the physicist': they can never be accepted as genuine or legitimate statements.<sup>38</sup>

So "(instead) of eradicating metaphysics from the empirical sciences, positivism leads to the invasion of metaphysics into the scientific realm"<sup>39</sup>. If scientific laws are to be preserved as science then, another criterion is needed - one that singles out the "logical form" of a system of propositions "by means of empirical tests, in a negative sense", so that for them to qualify as genuinely scientific, "it must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience"<sup>40</sup>. In a footnote added to the English edition, Popper reiterates that his falsification test was not meant as a criterion of meaning, a view about his work that he describes as "a sheer myth", but that it was meant to separate "two kinds of perfectly meaningful statements: the falsifiable and the non-falsifiable. It draws a line inside meaningful language, not around it"<sup>41</sup>, though the implications of his work are surely that it draws a line around meaningful *scientific* language, and so still raising the question of what is the connection between this and everyday empirical propositions.

These were basically the ideas that began to percolate into the philosophy of religion in the 'fifties, and this in itself shows its 'backwater' status, as by this time

another generation of analytic philosophers had appeared who were dissatisfied with their predecessors' attempts to construct a universal theory of meaning that would be applicable to all uses of language. This new generation in Britain was influenced by what was known of the new philosophy being worked out by Wittgenstein, who had returned to Cambridge in 1930, after spending the 'twenties in Austria, where he had worked without much success and with some eccentricity as a village school teacher. The new 'linguistic analysis' was distinguished by an emphasis on language as it was actually used, and that it was through careful consideration of this that its meaning would be understood, by determining the distinct 'grammar' that each usage had, and not by constructing an 'ideal' language of 'elementary' propositions, or an all-encompassing criterion of meaningfulness. However, philosophers had undoubtedly been led to this step, because of the impossibility the earlier generation had found in formulating a form of the verification/falsification criterion that could achieve any kind of widespread acceptance, and which did not result in forms of language the Positivists wished to maintain as meaningful being excluded. The final nail in the coffin of the Positivist enterprise came with a paper called "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"<sup>42</sup> by the American philosopher, W.V. Quine, who was himself an empiricist influenced by the Positivist enterprise. The significance of Quine's piece is that it has made philosophers wary of using the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions that was so important to the verificationist position. At its simplest, Quine's argument was that this distinction could not be defined, except through circularly using terms it already presupposed. This was because, probably building on Popper's reservations about the possibility of reducing complex propositions into allegedly 'elementary' ones, Quine argued it was not possible to make propositions answerable to sense-experience *individually*, but only *collectively*, so that any statement, even the laws of logic, was potentially revisable in the light of experience, though some revisions would have more far-reaching implications than others for the rest of the propositions we presume to know.

Quine's argument has also been influential, as it has been seen to undermine the foundationalism underlying the modern philosophical enterprise since Descartes, and which Frege, Wittgenstein and the Positivists were heir to. This is because the



other 'dogma' of empiricism he denies is that of reductionism, "the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience"<sup>43</sup>, and which he argues is intimately related to his first dogma, the distinction between analytic and synthetic. For Quine, the problem with reductionism is that a generally convincing answer has never been found in all its formulations to the question, "What ... is the nature of the relation between a statement and the experiences which contribute to or detract from its confirmation?"<sup>44</sup>. In its various forms, it has been unable to avoid vagueness about what the nature of sense-data were supposed to be in relation to this particular proposition, and how different sense-data were supposed to be agglomerated together in the development of more complex hypothetical statements. These problems lie behind Quine's espousal of the position "that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense-experience not individually but only as a corporate body"<sup>45</sup>, and results in him moving to a 'holistic' position. For instance, science "has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the statements of science one by one":

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections - the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field. Having re-evaluated one statement we must re-evaluate some others, which may be statements logically connected with the first or may be the statements of logical connections themselves. But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.<sup>46</sup>

It will be argued below that a similar position underlies Wittgenstein's later

philosophical development, and that if this is taken seriously, the way Wittgenstein's later philosophy has previously influenced the philosophy of religion will be revealed to be somewhat superficial. This is not surprising, when it is considered that the philosophy of religion seems to have a longer reception period for the ideas developed in mainstream philosophy than other subsidiary disciplines in the subject, or at least that is the impression that looking at the 'fifties produces, when one looks at the impact the verification debate began to have then. It is with the situation that this produced in the philosophy of religion that the next chapter will deal.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Dummett in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pp. 666-667.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 667.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 668.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* pp. 668-669.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 669.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> All biographical information is derived from Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Vintage 1991, which provides an account of his entire life, and from Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life - Young Ludwig, 1889-1921*, Penguin 1990, which is obviously only of use for the period of his early philosophy..

<sup>9</sup> Definition by O.R. Jones in Ted Honderich ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press 1995, p. 289.

<sup>10</sup> Definitions by D.W. Hamlyn in Honderich *op.cit.* pp. 386-387.

<sup>11</sup> The translation used is the 1961 version by David Pears and Brian F. McGuinness, published by Routledge. Wittgenstein's writings are often divided up into short remarks and numbered accordingly, so that all references to works by Wittgenstein, unless indicated otherwise, will be placed in the text and not in footnotes, and the

numbers used refer to the particular remark being quoted.

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell 1961, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1984, p. 70.

It needs to be pointed out that the exposition of the nature of 'simples' in the *Tractatus* followed here is dependent upon Malcolm's account in chaps. 1-3 of his *Nothing is Hidden*, Basil Blackwell 1986. This is not the universally accepted interpretation, and that Brian F. McGuinness, one of the *Tractatus*'s co-translators, claims that Wittgenstein's talk about 'simples' is not to be taken 'realistically' as Malcolm does (for instance, this is his position in "The So-Called Realism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" in Irving Block ed., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Basil Blackwell 1981, pp. 60-73) However, as Malcolm points out while it cannot be 'said' that simple objects exist, the whole thrust of the *Tractatus* is to *show* that they must. Wittgenstein's insistence on language needing a definite sense meant that the 'world' had to have a 'fixed form', and according to the *Tractatus* (§ 2.026) "Only if there are objects can the world have a fixed form".

<sup>15</sup> For the main discussion of the significance of tautology in the *Tractatus*, see § 446-44661, and for its relationship to logic, see § 612-61203.

<sup>16</sup> These were recorded at the time, and published much later in Brian F. McGuinness ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, Basil Blackwell 1979.

<sup>17</sup> A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 2nd edition 1946, p. 31 (from the "Preface to First Edition").

<sup>18</sup> In *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Counterpoint (Unwin Paperbacks) 1982.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> *Language, Truth and Logic op.cit.* p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* pp. 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> In Chapter 5.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. 1959.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p.37.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* footnote \*3, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> The paper originally appeared in the *Philosophical Review*, January 1951, but was reprinted in W.V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harvard University Press 1953 - the version quoted here is from the 2nd edition of the above, published in 1964.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

## Chapter Two

If Logical Positivism came to be seen as a crude reductionism rather too intent on ironing out the complexities of language, then its successor, Linguistic Analysis was presented by its critics as if it was nothing but a trivial description of the use of words, which had no more significance for the way human beings actually lived their lives than the study of philology or etymology. The first, and perhaps the harshest, presentation of this view appeared in 1959 in *Words and Things* by Ernest Gellner<sup>1</sup>. He was certain that the movement he was describing was derived from the inspiration of Wittgenstein and the philosophy he developed after his return to Cambridge in the 1930s. While much of what he says is a caricature, like most caricatures, there is enough truth to make what is said telling. Central to Gellner's attack on what he understands to be Linguistic philosophy is a phenomenon he terms "polymorphism"; according to him, this 'doctrine' "stresses that there is very great variety in the kinds of use that words have, and that with regard to any given word, there can be great variety in its particular use. From this correct insistence on the variety of uses, both between and within concepts, it is concluded, incorrectly, that general assertions about the use of words are impossible"<sup>2</sup>. Instead, there is "an immense stress on complexity, on variegation, on the shadowy borderlines and transitions of concepts, on the *sui generis* nature of linguistic forms and of philosophic problems", so that "generality is treated with utmost reserve, if not with contempt"<sup>3</sup>.

For Gellner, the rejection of generality would effectively undermine all that he believes to be important in philosophy, and so he regards Linguistic philosophy as "an attempt to undermine and paralyse one of the most important kinds of thinking, and one of the main agents of progress, namely intellectual advance through consistency and unification, through the attainment of coherence, the elimination of exceptions, arbitrarinesses, and unnecessary idiosyncrasies". In doing this, it ends up "(underwriting) all current concepts, however useless, anachronistic, inconsistent", so that philosophy becomes "the undermining of general models and of models *as such*, as models - only the actual ungeneral *description* of an usage is philosophically 'aseptic', and commendable"<sup>4</sup>. It results in a movement espousing obscurity, rather

than clarity, as it proclaims "the notions that certain important things are unsayable ... that truth must be communicated in a kind of oblique way, and that it can only be done in an extremely piecemeal and detailed manner if it is not to be misleading"<sup>5</sup>. Gellner believed part of the problem lay in the origin of the movement as a reaction against Logical Positivism, because he felt that for many philosophers in the case of the earlier movement, "the logical activities it programmatically implies are disagreeable", and "the nihilistic implications which in fact it has, if taken seriously, are embarrassing (the world seen, in effect, as a reiteration or conglomeration of sensation and feeling)", and that as a result they turned to the ideas of the later Wittgenstein as "a godsend". Instead, he "provided interesting, though mistaken exegesis of the Oxford English Dictionary - why they should say nothing philosophical, but merely describe what we normally say"<sup>6</sup>. In the case of Wittgenstein, this is unfair, though it may be a far more accurate caricature of other later philosophers who perhaps inaccurately saw themselves as working under Wittgenstein's influence. It is true that in parts of the book, Gellner is able to paraphrase some of the more unfortunate rhetoric Wittgenstein did occasionally indulge in about the nature of philosophy, but it is doubtful if he is really fair to the substance of Wittgenstein's later work, as will be discussed in a later chapter when his post-*Tractatus* philosophy is considered.

Gellner's criticisms can therefore make it seem surprising to the unwary that when the 'revolution in philosophy' did begin to breach the defences of the philosophy of religion in the early nineteen fifties, it could and did have drastic implications that one would not expect from such alleged academic nit-picking. Part of the reason for this was that the 'revolution' that swept in was mainly the one perpetrated by the Positivist Old Guard, and their brusque demands for meaning did prove to have traumatic effects. For instance, in the case of the philosopher, Anthony Kenny, familiarity with the 'new' philosophy changed the whole direction of his life<sup>7</sup>. In the early 'fifties, he was training for the Roman priesthood at the Gregorian, when he decided to write his licentiate dissertation on contemporary British philosophy. This gave him an appreciation for analytic philosophy, which eventually lead him in the late 'fifties to Oxford. While he did study under a surviving member of the Vienna Circle,



Friedrich Waismann, he also encountered the leading figures of Linguistic Analysis there, J.L. Austin (1911-1960) and Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976). Austin could perhaps be accused with more justification than Wittgenstein of indulging in interesting, but mistaken exegesis of the O.E.D., and Ryle was the editor of *Mind*, who refused to give Gellner's book house room in his journal, yet despite Gellner's claims, their seemingly trivial interest in language and supposed acceptance of it in all its "useless, anachronistic, inconsistent" forms did not stop Kenny's questioning of the meaningfulness of religious language in a way that was supposed to have become old fashioned. So whatever other personal psychological and emotional factors may have played a part in his eventual laicization and movement to agnosticism, Kenny's philosophical interests certainly were involved in this process. He came to feel that the objections the 'new' empiricism raised against religious language were unavoidable - that religious language, as it was neither tautologous nor empirically verifiable, was meaningless, unless some validity could be given to the traditional arguments for the existence of God, which his exposure to empiricism naturally meant he was already not predisposed to accept as valid.

Although Kenny's account of the erosion of his faith does not provide exact references to what he read<sup>8</sup>, it is obvious from it that the most influential papers were those collected in 1955 into what is certainly the book most closely associated with the 'revolution' in the philosophy of religion. This was *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, a collection of essays that had appeared over the previous decade, and were now edited together by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>9</sup>. This book even finds a place in Adrian Hastings' history of Christianity in Britain since the First War, as he sees it as one of the last flourishes of Logical Positivism, remarking that "a perusal of that work shows a pretty weak theistic defence against a prevailing agnostic confidence that linguistic philosophy had finally demonstrated the meaninglessness of religion"<sup>10</sup>. Hastings goes on to claim that *New Essays* represented the nadir in the relationship between philosophy and theology, and that in fact better times were already just around the corner, with the arrival of the new generation of philosophers espousing the Linguistic Analysis Gellner took exception to. This movement did actually manage to follow its predecessor, Logical Positivism, into the philosophy of

religion with some speed, probably because it was eagerly utilised as a balm to the wound Positivism had inflicted. Hastings, like Gellner, sees its origins in the influence of Wittgenstein, and the philosophy he developed in reaction to the difficulties he had come to see in the *Tractatus* during the 1930s. In Hastings' account of the decade, philosophy was about to lose the hostility to religion that had characterised it since the demise of Idealism. This was the result of the appearance of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, because it allegedly "undermined the intellectual consensus of 'the modern mind' with its positivistic domination by a certain type of science".

He showed it to be as open to challenge as the religious consensus of any earlier age. One often naive intellectual arrogance had been replaced by another. Wittgenstein was the small boy looking at the modern emperor's clothes. He succeeded in intruding upon the Anglo-Saxon philosophical consciousness a sense of limitation relevant for the secularist as much as for the theologian, so that while the preceding agnosticism took it for granted that the methodological limitations of linguistic analysis effectively annihilated the meaningfulness of transcendental talk, Wittgenstein's agnosticism related to linguistic philosophy itself. It left the door open for religious faith, and whatever his own position in this regard ... it has certainly been central to the lives of some subsequent Wittgensteinians.<sup>11</sup>

Given the criticisms by those like Gellner unimpressed by the whole tenor of the Linguistic Analysis movement, while the image of Wittgenstein as the little innocent pointing out to his fellow philosophers their pretensions, and calling them to adopt a more agnostic attitude to the capacities of their discipline may have some force, Hastings is obviously going too far in claiming that Wittgenstein was somehow able to carry an entire philosophical generation with him in extending an agnostic tolerance to religion. True, a number of prominent philosophers in the post-war era have been believers - Donald MacKinnon<sup>12</sup>, Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and Michael Dummett - and some were either directly or indirectly influenced by Wittgenstein, but this is hardly enough to conclude, as Hastings does, that the 'fifties meant that "(the), at the time almost successful, attempt of inter-war philosophy to dismiss religion as nonsense had proved to be a very temporary phenomenon"<sup>13</sup>. If 'Anglo-Saxon' philosophy, which is now a far more heterogeneous, and American dominated, affair, does not spend its time dismissing religious belief, it is far more



likely that this is because most of the diverse strands that now comprise it simply do not notice its existence at all. A fact that surely must reflect the way that all the significant strands of Anglo-American philosophy do derive in some way or other from the empiricist sympathies of the various forms of analytic philosophy.

If this is the case, then *New Essays* cannot be dismissed quite so readily by the theologian, as it can be by the ecclesiastical historian. The book may be seen as a period piece, but it still indicates some of the problems facing theology in a hostile philosophical climate. If this is not recognised now, this should not really be any surprise, as on its appearance, it could not be said that it appeared to unduly trouble the theological world. For instance, if one looks at what were probably the two chief English theological journals at the time, it hardly caused a ripple. *The Journal of Theological Studies* missed its existence completely, while *Theology* provided it with a brief review along with two books that attempted to marry Continental philosophy with theological concerns<sup>14</sup>. However, this apparent indifference contrasts starkly with the importance the two editors, Flew and MacIntyre, appear to find for the book in their introduction. They acknowledge the importance of "the recent revolution in philosophy" to the various contributors, and appear to see the book as the first substantive attempt in the philosophy of religion to take seriously the implications of analytic philosophy. They even claim that the title of the book has been carefully chosen to distinguish their 'new' enterprise, of applying the 'techniques' and 'insights' of linguistic analysis to theological issues, from what has 'traditionally' been meant by the phrase, philosophy of religion, because the latter term is unfortunately indelibly associated with "Idealist attempts to present philosophical prolegomena to theistic theology"<sup>15</sup>.

Hastings was correct in his estimation of the volume that the agnostics had the better of it, as the contribution that has transcended the decade of its appearance, is one of those that seems to encapsulate the agnostic confidence that the meaninglessness of religious language was almost certainly demonstrable. None of the theistic contributions have managed to provoke the kind of debate that this piece managed to do for nearly two decades after its appearance in *New Essays*. This is the contribution

by Antony Flew to a symposium on *Theology and Falsification*, which had first appeared in a short-lived Oxford periodical called *University* in 1950-1951. This brief paper was in turn related to an essay entitled 'Gods' by John Wisdom<sup>16</sup>, which the editors of *New Essays* had acknowledged in their introduction to be "the paper from which much of the present discussion arose"<sup>17</sup>. Wisdom (1904-1993) was one of a number of Cambridge philosophers, like G.E. Moore, who despite being lecturers themselves attended Wittgenstein's tutorials when he returned to academic life in the early thirties. Wisdom eventually went on to be one of Wittgenstein's successors as Professor of Philosophy (1952-1969), and readily acknowledged the profound influence that Wittgenstein's new philosophical direction had upon his own development. However, Wittgenstein never seems to have regarded him as a philosophical *confidant* as he did some of his other pupils, and he may not have accepted how much of the influence was actually his that Wisdom felt had been exerted on him.

However, Flew uses Wisdom's essay as a starting point from which to give a new twist to the verificationist/falsificationist demand that language must meet certain criteria to be meaningful, by reworking for his own ends a parable about the logical peculiarities of religious language that Wisdom had devised. Wisdom's own version of the parable was designed to show that what can seem to be an explanatory hypothesis, such as the existence of God, which apparently starts out as an experimentally verifiable claim can eventually mutate into its opposite:

Two people return to their long neglected garden and find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other 'It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants'. Upon inquiry they find that no neighbour has ever seen anyone at work in the garden. The first man says to the other 'He must have worked while people slept'. The other says 'No, someone would have heard him and besides, anybody who cared about the plants would have kept down the weeds'. The first man says 'Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and a feeling for beauty here. I believe that someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe that the more carefully we look the more we shall have confirmation of this'. They examine the garden ever so carefully and sometimes they come on new things suggesting that a gardener comes and sometimes they come on new things suggesting the contrary and even that a

malicious person has been at work. Besides examining the garden carefully they also study what happens to gardens left without attention. Each learns all the other learns about this and about the garden. Consequently, when after this, one says 'I still believe a gardener comes' while the other says 'I don't' their different words now reflect no difference as to what they have found in the garden, no difference as to what they would find in the garden if they looked further and no difference about how fast untended gardens fall into disorder.<sup>18</sup>

Wisdom's point is that what began as an explanatory hypothesis about the condition of the garden has ceased to have anything to do with observation or experimentation, as neither side now expects anything to occur that the other does not, but one still insists, "A gardener comes unseen and unheard. He is manifested only in his works with which we are all familiar", while the other can only say, "There is no gardener"<sup>19</sup>.

The difference between these two people and how they feel towards the garden has ceased to be connected with empirical considerations, as the believer is not claiming to see anything that the other does not, so raising the question whether "this (is) the whole difference between them - that the one calls the garden by one name and feels one way towards it, while the other calls it by another name and feels in another way towards it?"<sup>20</sup> If this is the case, Wisdom asks is it appropriate here to ask 'What is right?' or 'Which is reasonable?'. The parable of course illustrates the relation between the believer and unbeliever looking at the allegedly created world, and arguing about whether there is in fact design, and so a Designer, or whether blind chance is behind the apparent order there, and it is here that Wisdom makes a point that provides the basis for Flew's utilisation of his parable. In the case of God, and seeing the world as His 'garden', Wisdom maintains that it surely has to be appropriate to ask of the two opposing viewpoints, 'What is right?' and 'Which is reasonable?'. He claims it may be possible to ignore such questions, if one is dealing with when a man sings 'God's in His Heaven', as this may be no more "than an expression of how he feels"; but the situation is different, if it is a case of "when Bishop Gore or Dr. Joad<sup>21</sup> write about belief in God and young men read them in order to settle their religious doubts", as the importance that is attached to such matters does not seem to be "simply that of persons choosing exclamations with which

to face nature and the 'changes and chances of this mortal life'"<sup>22</sup>. Wisdom insists that the dispute about the existence of God does seem to involve the disputants in speaking "as if they are concerned with a matter of scientific fact, or of trans-sensual, trans-scientific and metaphysical fact, but still of fact and still a matter about which reasons for and against may be offered, although no scientific reasons in the sense of field surveys for fossils or experiments on delinquents are to the point."<sup>23</sup>

In "Gods", Wisdom is prepared to leave unresolved this ambiguity about religious language, whereby it is used as if it is, and *must* be, about something 'factual', but that the means of nailing this 'fact' down can never be specified. The significance of Flew's piece is that he decides to take this '*must*' aspect seriously. For him, religious language is so important, one cannot leave unresolved the questions of 'What is right?' and 'Which is reasonable?'. He sees it as "the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of theological utterance" that what begins as an assertion - 'There is a God' - may be "reduced step by step to an altogether different status ... Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications"<sup>24</sup>. He insists that such utterances as 'God has a plan', 'God created the world', 'God loves us as a father loves his children' look "at first sight very much like assertions, vast cosmological assertions" - and so should be taken as such. He acknowledges that some may "intend or interpret such utterances as crypto-commands, expressions of wishes, disguised ejaculations, concealed ethics, or as anything else but assertions", but insists that such people "are unlikely to succeed in making them (the utterances) either properly orthodox or practically effective"<sup>25</sup>. Flew then moves on to show the usefulness of the 'falsifiability principle' in such a context, because if one does take theological propositions as 'assertions', one has to face the challenge that "to assert that such and such is the case is necessarily equivalent to denying that such and such is not the case".

Suppose then that we are in doubt as to what someone who gives vent to an utterance is asserting, or suppose that, more radically, we are sceptical as to whether he is really asserting anything at all, one way of trying to understand (or perhaps it will be to expose) his utterance is to attempt to find what he would regard as counting against, or as being incompatible with, its truth. For if the utterance is indeed an

assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion. And anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of that assertion. And to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion.<sup>26</sup>

The problem with theological utterances, from this point of view, is that it seems to those who do not accept them that "there (is) no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding 'There wasn't a God after all' or 'God does not really love us then'". And Flew finds an example of such an 'utterance' in a context where belief in God is always at its most vulnerable -

Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made - God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love', perhaps - and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father (but, of course, ...)'. We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'? <sup>27</sup>

This is therefore the challenge that Flew presents the believer with. One either had to specify what would have to happen to falsify religious propositions, or alternately explain why in this context such an apparently justifiable demand was in fact unjustified.

The importance of Flew's challenge therefore lies in the fact that it is not dependent upon identifying the meaningfulness of language with its verifiability or falsifiability as fact-asserting, which is effectively what the demands of the Logical Positivists and their successors' appeared to amount. Instead Wisdom and Flew were merely pointing out that religious language appeared to consider itself at certain times



to be fact-asserting language, but then at other times refused to behave like ordinary fact-asserting language, and so they then proceeded to ask believers how they could justify this anomaly. It is probably not too far fetched to claim that much of the writing that was done in the next decade about the status of religious language, from Ian T. Ramsey's book of that title in 1957 to John Macquarrie's *God-Talk* in 1967, was an attempt to answer this challenge made by the Wisdom/Flew parable, and provide some kind of credible account of why religious language had the curious status that it did, and how it could be justified (or even how it did not need to be justified). Part of the edge was perhaps taken off the challenge, because by the time it became widely known in the late 1950s, the generation of analytic philosophers who were the target of Gellner's attack had come to the fore, such as Austin, Ryle and John Wisdom himself, whose kind of analysis did not seem to necessarily have the reductionist conclusions of the type associated with the Logical Positivists. In fact, rightly or wrongly, such analysis was popularized with what J.O. Urmson termed 'two new slogans' - "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use" and "Every statement has its own logic"<sup>28</sup> - both of which could be claimed to have originated in the work Wittgenstein had been doing since the 1930s, and which of course were precisely the sort of claims that Gellner had seen as dangerous to true philosophical clarity. However, one of the inspirations behind the new Linguistic philosophy, John Wisdom, had already provided a very prescient critique in 1938 of the way some theologians and philosophers of religion would two decades later go on to use a pastiche of the new type of analysis as a way of avoiding such challenges to religious belief as Flew's. In discussing the verification principle, Wisdom introduces its opposite, what he terms the "Idiosyncrasy Platitude":

According to the idiosyncrasy platitude every sort of statement has its own meaning, and when philosophers ask 'What is the analysis of X-propositions?' the answer is that they are ultimate, that 'everything is what it is and not another thing'<sup>29</sup>

This seems very close to the alleged 'doctrine' of polymorphism that Gellner identified in Linguistic Analysis, and shows the danger of caricature is in producing precisely the kind of false generality that the insistence on the particular was meant to show up, as Gellner was unable to recognise that what he was criticising was already something some of the proponents of the 'new' analysis had recognised for themselves. However,

this does not alter the fact that the phenomenon Wisdom and Gellner were describing under different terms was not a real position that some had unfortunately come close to, by claiming that because religious language was clearly not the same as the kind of fact-asserting propositions common in language about everyday objects, then it could just be accepted as having a 'logic' of its own, and that it had therefore somehow become impervious to criticism.

However, it was also the case that accepting that the meaning of a statement was its use did not necessarily mean that one hoped to maintain the fact-asserting character of religious language. In fact, there has been a minority position among theologians and philosophers of religion since the 1950s that the oddities of religious language mean it cannot be aspiring to the kind of cognitive content usually ascribed to statements about everyday objects, and so its use must actually be found elsewhere. Perhaps the first statement of this was by Richard Bevan Braithwaite in his 1955 Eddington Lecture, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*<sup>30</sup>. Braithwaite (1900-1990) was another of that group of Cambridge academics who attended Wittgenstein's lectures after he had returned to the university. He went on to be the holder of the Knightbridge chair in Moral Philosophy, a slightly incongruous position for a philosopher best known for his staunchly empiricist work in the philosophy of science. As his lecture appeared before the Wisdom/Flew parable achieved a wide circulation in *New Essays*, it may be he was not personally familiar with it, but it has certainly since been taken as one possible response to the problems it raises. Braithwaite argued in his lecture that it was impossible to take religious statements as being in any sense empirical, but that this did not mean that they were meaningless, though they clearly were in the Positivist sense as they could not be taken as fact-asserting. Instead his understanding of their use was based on a comparison with moral statements, which similarly were seen to have failed the verificationist test of 'meaningfulness'. To overcome this, Braithwaite insists that the verification criterion for meaning should be modified into a criterion of use, so that "the meaning of any statement is given by the way it is used" - a modification he ascribes to the influence of Wittgenstein<sup>31</sup> - which means that while "the only way of discovering how a statement is used is by an empirical enquiry", the statement in

question therefore "need not itself be empirically verifiable, but that it is used in a particular way is always a straightforward empirical proposition". So if one wishes to determine the meaning of a religious statement, one must "explain, in empirical terms, how a religious statement is used by a man who asserts it in order to show his religious conviction". Braithwaite's basic position is that after investigating "how a religious statement is used by a man who asserts it in order to express his religious conviction", it becomes plain that "the primary element in this use is that the religious assertion is used as a moral assertion"<sup>32</sup>. So the meaning of a religious statement is identical with that of a moral statement, which is "that of expressing the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion"<sup>33</sup>.

So in rejecting religious statements as being fact-asserting, Braithwaite claims that their use is really to be "declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life":

... the intention of a Christian to follow a Christian way of life is not only the criterion for the sincerity of his belief in the assertions of Christianity; it is the criterion for the meaningfulness of his assertions ... To say that it is belief in the dogmas of religion which is the cause of the believer's intending to behave as he does is to put the cart before the horse: it is the intention to behave which constitutes what is known as religious conviction.<sup>34</sup>

This naturally seems to raise problems, as many religious statements do look far more like they are trying to assert some information about a particular subject, but Braithwaite overcomes the problems raised by the apparent cognitive content of "the dogmas of religion", by arguing that as each religious assertion is "representative of a large number of assertions of the same religious system", then "the body of assertions of which the particular one is a representative specimen is taken by the asserter as implicitly specifying a particular way of life". So it appears one should not be too concerned about the details of particular statements, but instead look to the overall moral impression generated by the whole body of statements, and in support Braithwaite claims:

It is no more necessary for an empiricist philosopher to explain the use of a religious statement taken in isolation from other religious statements than it is for him to give a meaning to a scientific hypothesis in isolation from other scientific hypotheses.<sup>35</sup>

If this does not satisfy the critic, Braithwaite goes on to claim that the statements seemingly about the activities of a mysterious entity, and the way these are woven in with what appear to be historical narratives, are present in a religion like Christianity because here, unlike in ordinary moral statements, "the intentions to pursue the behaviour policies ... are associated with thinking of different *stories*". Such stories are therefore what give religious statements the "propositional element" that distinguishes them from straightforward moral statements:

The reference to a story is not an assertion of the story taken as a matter of empirical fact: it is the telling of a story, or an alluding to the story, in the way in which one can tell, or allude to, the story of a novel with which one is acquainted. To assert the whole set of assertions of the Christian religion is both to tell the Christian doctrinal story and to confess allegiance to the Christian way of life.<sup>36</sup>

Braithwaite's position meant that some philosophers became wary of what the implications of accepting an understanding of meaning as use in the context of religious statements would be. One of these was John Hick (b. 1922), probably the best known philosopher of religion in the post-war period, who was professor at Claremont Graduate School in California from 1979 to his retirement in 1992, and before that had a varied career in the United States and Britain, including a formative period as Professor of Theology at Birmingham (1967-1982). Hick responded to the Wisdom/Flew parable by interpreting it in a distinctly Positivist fashion, accepting that if religious statements were to be fact-asserting, then it must be possible to specify what would have to happen to falsify them like any other statement. To this end, Hick developed the idea of eschatological verification. He first presented it in the 1957 edition of his *Faith and Knowledge* then only published in the United States, but he has been developing it and defending it ever since. A widely anthologised presentation of it appeared in *Theology Today* in 1960, and in the second edition of *Faith and Knowledge* published in Britain in 1967, he presented an expanded version with responses to his critics. While in 1977, he published in *Religious Studies* a longer response to the debate the original piece had produced. At the centre of Hick's argument is another parable, one that may owe something to his English nonconformist background, and the influence upon it of *Pilgrim's Progress*. This involves two travellers going along a road together, one thinks it leads to a Celestial

City, while the other believes it to lead to nowhere in particular. The first one accepts all that happens to them on the road as preparation for arrival in the City, and believes this has been planned by the king of the City, who will make everything worthwhile once they get there; while the second believing the journey to be simply unavoidable goes along trying to make the best of it that he can, with no expectations about the end. It is of course meant to refer to the belief in life after death that Hick assumes is inherent in Christian theism, and he argues his story can solve the problems raised for religious statements by the demand for verification, because in a way reminiscent of Ayer he argues if one is interested "in the verifiability of propositions as the criterion for their having factual meaning, the notion of prediction becomes central":

If a proposition contains or entails predictions which can be verified or falsified, its character as an assertion (though not of course its character as a true assertion) is thereby guaranteed<sup>37</sup>.

Hick also argues that Flew by posing his parable in the form of a demand for falsification gave the impression that verification and falsification must be symmetrically related. This is certainly the case in a simple empirical statement, such as "There is a table in the next room":

The verifying experiences in this case are experiences of seeing and touching, predictions of which are entailed by the proposition in question, under the proviso that one goes into the next room; and the absence of such experiences in these circumstances serves to falsify the proposition.

However, Hick points out that there are other kinds of propositions which one can fail to verify, but this cannot be taken as implying falsification. The example he uses is the proposition, "There are three successive sevens in the decimal determination of  $\Pi$ ":

So far as the value of  $\Pi$  has been worked out, it does not contain a series of three sevens, but it will always be true that such a series may occur at a point not yet reached in anyone's calculations. Accordingly, the proposition may one day be verified if it is true, but can never be falsified if it is false.

Hick therefore hopes to defend the character of religious statements as assertions of fact, by pointing out that they contain a prediction which he believes it is possible to verify, but not falsify. His position is therefore dependent on accepting that what he terms "the hypothesis of continued conscious existence after bodily death" can be



shown to be a necessary corollary of theism and the statements about God it involves. So that the prediction involved in the "hypothesis" - "that one will after the date of one's death have conscious experiences, including the experience of remembering death" - will also serve to verify the statements one had also been making about God in this life. However, because of the asymmetry in this prediction, while it "may be verified in one's own experience if it is true", it "cannot be falsified if it is false":

That is to say, it can be false, but *that* it is false can never be a fact which anyone has experientially verified. But this circumstance does not undermine the meaningfulness of the hypothesis, since it is also such that if it be true, it will be known to be true.<sup>38</sup>

Hick hopes that in this way he has helped to settle the problems Flew was illustrating in his use of the Invisible Gardener parable. The two explorers could do nothing but stand about and argue about whether the presence of flowers in the jungle clearing was evidence of the gardener's work, as nothing was going to occur that would be able to conclusively prove or disprove one or the other. So similarly the two travellers can argue about whether what they encounter on the road is sent by the king of the Celestial City or not, as while they are on the road nothing is going to happen to incontrovertibly prove one right and the other wrong. This is because, according to Hick, "the issue between them is not an experimental one. They do not entertain different expectations about the coming details of the road, but only about its ultimate destination". And this is of course the point - for Hick, it is the claim that the direction of our entire lives has a destination, a destination that cannot be plainly discerned in any one particular event *within* our lives, that will provide the resolution in his parable that is lacking in the story of the Invisible Gardener:

And yet when (the travellers) do turn the last corner it will be apparent that one of them has been right all the time and the other wrong. Thus although the issue between them has not been experimental, it has nevertheless from the start been a real issue. They have not merely felt differently about the road; for one was feeling appropriately and the other inappropriately in relation to the actual state of affairs. Their opposed interpretations of the road constituted genuinely rival assertions, though assertions whose assertion status has the peculiar characteristic of being guaranteed retrospectively by a future crux.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, Hick believes he can explain why both theist and atheist can agree about

the events that happen in the world, but that it still remains the case that "(the) universe as envisaged by the theist ... differs as a totality from the universe as envisaged by the atheist".

This difference does not, however, from our present standpoint within the universe, involve a difference in the objective content of each or even any of its passing moments. The theist and the atheist do not (or need not) expect different events to occur in the successive details of the temporal process. They do not (or need not) entertain divergent expectations of the course of history viewed from within. But the theist does and the atheist does not expect that when history is completed it will be seen to have led to a particular end-state and to have fulfilled a specific purpose, namely that of creating 'children of God'.<sup>40</sup>

Hick's claims about eschatological verification have, as might be expected, generated a great deal of controversy, not just from atheists, but also from fellow theists. However, this debate is not of relevance here - what is, is that it represents the main attempt to answer the verificationist attack inherent in Flew's challenge on its own ground, by claiming that it is possible to present religious language as being meaningful, because like any other form of meaningful language, it can be shown to be asserting genuine facts, which can ultimately be verified. To this end, at the same time as he developed eschatological verification, Hick also began a critique of other philosophies of religion that attempted to protect the meaningful status of religious language by rejecting the verificationist challenge as obsolete, and claiming that Linguistic Analysis helped secure religious language as a distinct type of discourse with a logic of its own, so coming perilously close to the Idiosyncrasy Platitude, or Gellner's derogatory claim of polymorphism. Hick first put forward these criticisms in his 'afterword' to a series of conference papers he edited in 1964<sup>41</sup>, where he terms this other view the "autonomist position". From his comments, he seems to have identified this position through hearing Norman Malcolm (1910-1990), perhaps Wittgenstein's most distinguished student, and other unidentified philosophers in discussion at this conference<sup>42</sup>. Hick is disturbed by talk about the supposed autonomy of the religious 'language-game', because if religious language "is autonomous, as the linguistic aspect of a form of life", then "modes of question, distinction, affirmation and denial which have their proper place in other 'language-games' (for instance,

those of the sciences) will if intruded here only give rise to false problems"<sup>43</sup>. Hick believes this attempt to insulate religious language from 'external' criticism is a false salvation, as if it is treated "as a language game with its own rules, or a speech activity having meaning only within its own borders", then it is evacuated "of 'ontological' or 'metaphysical' significance", by which Hick means it has ceased to be "a true declaration concerning an ultimate order of fact which sustains and governs all the more proximate types of fact"<sup>44</sup>, and so those pursuing this course end up unintentionally embracing Braithwaite's position.

So Hick's criticism is that unless religious language maintains its ability to assert something about a 'reality' external to the 'form of life' it operates in, the substance of traditional theistic belief will be removed. Returning to the point eschatological verification was meant to secure, Hick insists that "(a) conviction as to the reality of God is ... either a response to fact, rendered appropriate and rational by its conformity with fact, or it is delusory and is rendered inappropriate and irrational by its divergence from fact", and it is precisely this that Hick believes the 'autonomist' position fails to secure. It "confines religious truth-claims within the enclosed realm of the religious speech-activity itself", and all the adherent of this position can do is insist that critics of religious language must simply accept that the 'language-game' of religion is played, and this somehow gives it validity. The only problem with this, for Hick, is then while "there is no way in which it can be logically inappropriate or impermissible to engage in (this game); nor, however, is there then anyway in which it can be logically appropriate or proper to engage in it". This means that unless religious language is able to show it can make some 'factual' difference, as eschatological verification attempts to do, then as far as Hick is concerned religious language will fail to be meaningful, and be nothing more than a curious, linguistic game. If "(the) logical implications of religious statements do not extend across the borders of the *Sprachspiel* (i.e. language-game) into assertions concerning the character of the universe beyond that fragment of it which is the religious speech of human beings", then all religion will turn out to be is "the religious speech of human beings"<sup>45</sup>, that is used in particular situations, but with no referent to anything beyond the linguistic activity itself.

So for Hick, unless the fact-asserting status of religious language is defended according to the criteria of fact-asserting applicable to language about more everyday 'realities', he believes there is no alternative but to accept Braithwaite's understanding of the 'meaning as use' slogan, and so deprive religious language of any cognitive content, as its role in human life is in fact something else. It is interesting that Hick uses two terms associated with Wittgenstein's later philosophy - language-game (*Sprachspiel*) and form of life (*Lebensform*) - to characterise his opponent's position, assuming that these terms are obviously supposed to refer to patterns of behaviour that are logically insulated from anything else going on around them, and which derive their meaningfulness solely from themselves. If one looks at the paper by Norman Malcolm in the symposium<sup>46</sup>, which is presumably what Hick is responding to, it contains no reference to Wittgenstein and has only one mention of 'form of life'<sup>47</sup>, but it again demonstrates Hastings' claim that Wittgenstein had become seen as the progenitor of a trend in philosophy that seemed to provide a way out from difficult questions about the nature of religious language. However, while Hick was the first to criticise the attempt to insulate religious language against criticism by claiming religion to be a language-game or a form of life, it was a paper by Kai Nielsen that was to give this position the name by which it is still known - "Wittgensteinian Fideism".

"Wittgensteinian Fideism" appeared in the journal, *Philosophy*, in 1967<sup>48</sup>, and has had a great impact on the way Wittgenstein's later philosophy has since been perceived by philosophers of religion and theologians. Nielsen's concern in the article is with what appears to be a trend among a disparate group of philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein<sup>49</sup>, to identify religion with what he understood by the terms, language-game and form of life. Nielsen, as an atheist and a staunch defender of the empiricist heritage, finds this disturbing, because in his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>50</sup>, Wittgenstein claimed that "what has to be accepted, *the given*, is - so one could say - forms of life" (P.I. p. 226). Nielsen believes this group of philosophers are attempting to claim that religion cannot be subjected to any kind of critique that does not itself arise from the religious language-game or form of life, and he distils from their writings what he calls "a dark cluster of sayings" with " a

tendency to generate ... Wittgensteinian Fideism":-

1. The forms of language are the forms of life.
2. What is *given* are the forms of life.
3. Ordinary language is all right as it is.
4. A philosopher's task is not to evaluate or criticise language or the forms of life, but to describe them where necessary and to the extent necessary to break philosophical perplexity concerning their operation.
5. The different modes of discourse which are distinctive forms of life all have a logic of their own.
6. Forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism; each mode of discourse is in order as it is, for each has its own criteria and each sets its own norms of intelligibility, reality and rationality.
7. These general, dispute-engendering concepts, i.e. intelligibility, reality and rationality are systematically ambiguous; their exact meaning can only be determined in the context of a determinate way of life.
8. There is no Archimedean point in terms of which a philosopher (or for that matter anyone else) can relevantly criticise whole modes of discourse or, what comes to the same thing, ways of life, for each mode of discourse has its own specific criteria of rationality/irrationality, intelligibility/unintelligibility, and reality/unreality.<sup>51</sup>

Nielsen's concern is that his putative fideist could then go on to claim that "religion is a unique and very ancient form of life with its own distinctive criteria" which mean it could "only be understood or criticised, and then only in a piecemeal way, from within this mode by someone who has a participant's understanding of this mode of discourse"; and so to even argue, as Nielsen would like to, "that the very first-order discourse of this form of life is incoherent or irrational" is a confusion. He is not prepared to accept that it is "this very form of life, this very form of discourse itself, that sets its own criteria of coherence, intelligibility or rationality", which would mean that "(philosophy) cannot relevantly criticise religion; it can only display for us the workings, the style of functioning, of religious discourse"<sup>52</sup>.

Nielsen's 'dark' sayings do obviously reflect some aspects of Wittgenstein's writings. The remark at P.I. p. 226 which is echoed by saying no. 2 "What is *given* are the forms of life" has already been quoted. His saying no. 3 is also plainly a paraphrase of P.I. 124:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end



only describe it.

For it cannot give it any foundation either.

It leaves everything as it is.

However, some of Nielsen's sayings are more obscure. For instance, the first saying about the forms of language being equivalent to the forms of life presumably meant to refer to an alleged equivalence between language-games and forms of life, because Wittgenstein does not actually talk about forms of language. Saying no. 5 would also imply that these language-games and forms of life are to be taken as equivalent to what Nielsen there terms modes of discourse, which is presumably itself a reference to what he calls "the first-order discourse of religion". It is precisely this that Nielsen does not want to admit is "all right as it is", and which his saying no. 8 seems to imply should be subject to an "Archimedean point", which would decide the criteria determining the "rationality, intelligibility and reality" (or otherwise) of the religious "mode of discourse". As will be discussed in a later chapter, it is certainly correct that Wittgenstein would have been deeply skeptical of such a position, and Nielsen's saying no. 4 rejecting the capacity of philosophy to decide this is again "Wittgensteinian", as it draws directly upon the group of remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations*, between P.I. 109 and 133, of which P.I. 124 quoted above is a part. Such a view of philosophy certainly means that Nielsen's apparent quest for the "Archimedean point" would have met with little sympathy, as it seems to imply that there is some sort of "logical form" underlying all the "modes of discourse" that make up language, and that for a "mode" to be meaningful, it must be possible to show that it can be analyzed into such a "form". This was of course Wittgenstein's own position in the *Tractatus*, and one of the theories in that book he was most concerned to disavow in his later work. However, this does not mean that Wittgenstein would have recognised what he understood by language-games and forms of life in Nielsen's picture of these monolithic entities, such as "religion" or "science", which as language-games - cum - forms of life - cum - modes of discourse simply have to be accepted as having a logic of their own, so apparently making them inviolate, and raising the question how communication between these different 'areas' of language would be possible.

Fifteen years after introducing "Wittgensteinian Fideism", Nielsen returned to

the argument in his book, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*<sup>53</sup>. In it, he not only expanded his list of fideist offenders<sup>54</sup>, but also added another more interesting argument to his critiques of his putative fideists' claims that religious language cannot be subject to criteria derived from other forms of language. This is simply to ask, "What is "a form of life" or "a distinct form of life"?":

Are we simply talking about general human categories such as art, religion, morality, politics, science and astrology or are we speaking of something more specific, for example abstract expressionism, quantum mechanics, Seventh Day Adventism or what?<sup>55</sup>

Nielsen has now realised that a convenient way to attack the idea of religion as a language-game or form of life is to question whether it is ever stated plainly what the latter terms are supposed to mean. He can find no clear cut definitions in the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>56</sup>, and complains that "Forms of life and language-games seem to range from specific activities to something very general like mathematics or morality":

Sometimes the specific activities called 'language-games' seem to get identified as forms of life or sometimes they seem ... to be parts of language, or, more likely, parts of the general activity of speech where it is the general activity itself which is the form of life. Wittgenstein's varied examples seem to indicate that sometimes he means nothing more determinate by 'language-game' and 'forms of life' than 'things done with words'. So we are left very much up in the air as to what we are to take as a form of life: a form which is (1) also a language or a part of a language, (2) conceptually self-sufficient and (3) can require or receive no justification or foundation.<sup>57</sup>

Without closer definition, Nielsen argues, it is difficult to see why one should accept the "Wittgensteinian" claim that forms of life, and language-games, just have to be accepted - he acknowledges it "*may* be true for *some* forms of life, but why for all - particularly if 'forms of life' includes fairly specific activities: distinctive ways of doing things with words?":

Why should it be true, or is it true, that all our routes of interest, modes of response, notions of explanation, conceptions of rebuke are immune to philosophical criticism?<sup>58</sup>

This inevitably raises the question of what exactly Wittgenstein understood language-games and forms of life to be, and what their relationship was to the rest of his

philosophical ideas, and so whether they were the vague, and potentially confusing, concepts that Nielsen had felt himself forced to conclude that they were.

However, before going on to deal with this matter directly, by a careful discussion of what Wittgenstein actually had to say about language-games and forms of life, and the role he envisaged they played in the philosophical method he had developed, it will be necessary to deal with the work of the philosopher whose name has become most closely associated with the term, "Wittgensteinian Fideism" - D.Z. Phillips. It is probably true that when Wittgenstein is mentioned in relation to the philosophy of religion, the only 'contribution' most students of theology or philosophy could mention is "Wittgensteinian Fideism", and the main, if not the only, proponent of this position they would be able to name is Phillips. As these generalizations are so central to the way Wittgenstein's work has been received in this area, it is essential that they be seriously discussed, because there are some difficult problems involved, not just in whether talk of language-games and forms of life have anything to do with the 'fideism' outlined by Nielsen, but also in whether Phillips actually holds this position himself, and if he does not, then what is the influence of Wittgenstein upon him. To this end, in the next chapter, an account will need to be given of how Phillips understands the role of philosophy in relation to religious belief, and how his understanding of this has been influenced by Wittgenstein. It will also need to be discussed if his understanding or use of the terms, language-game or form of life, really fit the negative, 'monolithic' image of them presented by Nielsen. Whether Phillips does follow any of the stereotypes presented by Nielsen, it would in any case be difficult not to deal with his work, because no matter his relation to the 'fideist' debate, his writings would still represent the best-known, and longest sustained, attempt by a philosopher of religion in the post-war period to utilize the legacy of Wittgenstein in this area.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology*, Victor Gollancz 1959.

The 'harshness' of what Gellner had to say in the book about the school of Linguistic

Analysis sparked off a controversy when the editor of *Mind* refused to allow the book to be reviewed there, and a dispute broke out in the letter columns of the *Times*, between those sympathetic to Gellner, who were mainly of the older Positivist or empiricist persuasion, and those who felt themselves the target of his criticisms. A journalistic account of this strange episode is to be found in the first chapter of Ved Mehta's *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (Penguin 1965).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> This account is dependent upon Anthony Kenny's entertaining, and possibly selective, 'confession' of his de-conversion from the church of his birth, *The Path from Rome: An Autobiography*, Sidgwick & Jackson 1985, in particular chapters 8 & 11.

<sup>8</sup> pp. 143-144 of *The Path from Rome* could only be referring to the essays collected in Antony Flew & Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, S.C.M. Press Ltd. 1955.

<sup>9</sup> Flew and MacIntyre, like Kenny, also represent the corrosive effects of analytic philosophy upon a conventional religious upbringing. Flew (b. 1923), who later became Professor of Philosophy at the new Keele University and then at Reading, was the son of the prominent early twentieth century Methodist scholar, Newton Flew; and MacIntyre (b.1929) seemed to drift away from conventional Christianity during the sixties, as he made a peripatetic journey from teaching at Manchester, Leeds, Oxford and Princeton to being a politically radical Professor of Sociology at Essex at the end of that decade. However, he has after moving to America, and being successively Professor of Philosophy at institutions like Vanderbilt and Notre-Dame, reverted to the Episcopalianism of his youth and developed an interest in Thomistic neo-Aristotelianism and its significance for ethical behaviour in community, from which position he now occupies the chair of Philosophy at Duke University, North Carolina.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Hastings - *A History of English Christianity, 1920-1985* - William Collins & Sons 1986, p. 499.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 500.

<sup>12</sup> Though MacKinnon's complete absence from the 1995 *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (edited by Ted Honderich) perhaps implies that he is now considered to be solely a theologian by the British philosophical community.

<sup>13</sup> Hastings *op.cit.* p. 501.

<sup>14</sup> The review by B.M.G. Reardon is in *Theology* Vol.59, No.432 June 1956. The other books under discussion are *Subject and Object in Modern Theology* by James Brown (discussing the significance of 'existentialism' in its Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian forms) and *Living and Knowing* by E.W.F. Tomlin (which has a debt to an eclectic group of thinkers, including Max Scheler, Semyon Frank and Simone Weil).

<sup>15</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. x.

<sup>16</sup> Originally published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 45, 1944-1945, and later reprinted in Wisdom's *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis*, Basil Blackwell, 1953 from which all references will be taken.

<sup>17</sup> Flew & MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. xi.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 154-155.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Charles Gore, C.R. (1853-1932) was respectively the Bishop of Worcester, Birmingham and Oxford and probably the leading figure in the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England in the early twentieth century. C.E.M. Joad (1891-1953) was a mainly 'freelance' philosopher, who did eventually find a post at Birkbeck College, but who was probably best known for his appearances on the B.B.C.'s *Brains Trust*. Both were also known for producing works of popular apologetic on behalf of Christian theism.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* pp. 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* pp. 98-99.

<sup>28</sup> See chapter 11, and particularly p. 179, of J.O. Urmson's *Philosophical Analysis*, Clarendon Press, 1956.

<sup>29</sup> From "Metaphysics and Verification", reprinted in Wisdom *op.cit.* p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1955 and reprinted in numerous collections since.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 10.



<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* pp. 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from the paper, "Theology and Verification", originally published in *Theology Today*, April 1960, but all references taken from the version in John Badham ed., *A John Hick Reader*, Macmillan 1990, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* pp. 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "Sceptics and Believers" in John Hick ed., *Faith and the Philosophers*, Macmillan 1964, pps. 235-250.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p. 237.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p. 238.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p. 239.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> "Is it a Religious Belief that 'God Exists'?" in *Faith and the Philosophers op.cit.* pp. 103-110.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* p. 107.

"If one conceived of God as the Almighty Creator of the world and Judge of mankind how could one believe that he exists, but not be touched *at all* by awe or dismay or fear? ... Would a belief that He exists, if it were completely non-affective, really be a belief that He exists? Would it be anything at all? What is the 'form of life' into which it would enter? What difference would it make whether anyone did or did not have this belief?"

Malcolm's paper is a rather confused attempt to argue that it is not important whether religious belief can be shown to have arisen completely from 'reason-irrelevant' natural factors, because religious belief is not the kind of activity that needs rational grounds, because it is impossible to separate belief *that* God exists from belief *in* God, as it is impossible to think that anyone could believe the former without the latter, i.e. that belief in God's existence could not fail to be a profoundly affective experience. It may be doubted whether Malcolm really shows why a belief may not be at the same time affective, i.e. produce awe, dismay and fear, and still have rational grounds.

<sup>48</sup> Vol. 42, No. 161, July 1967.

<sup>49</sup> The philosophers named by Nielsen are:-

Peter Winch - *The Idea of a Social Science*, Macmillan 1958, and the article, "Understanding a Primitive Society", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Oct. 1964, pp. 307-325.

G.E. Hughes - "Martin's Religious Belief", a book review in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Aug. 1962, pp. 211-219.

Norman Malcolm - "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 69, No. 1 1960 and "Is it a Religious Belief that 'God Exists'?" mentioned above.

Peter Geach - "Nominalism", *Sophia*, Vol. 3 No. 2 1964.

Stanley Cavell - "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy", *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, Summer 1964.

J.M. Cameron - *The Night Battle*, Burns & Oates 1962 and "What is a Christian?", *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 6, 26th May 1966.

Robert Coburn - "A Neglected Use of Theological Language", *Mind*, Vol. 72, July 1963.

<sup>50</sup> As with other works of Wittgenstein's, all references will be given in the text and will be to the numbers given to each section in Part 1; however, the remarks in Part 2 are not numbered in this way, and so references will then be given to the page number.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* pp. 192-193.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p. 193.

<sup>53</sup> Macmillan 1982.

<sup>54</sup> He now adds as "central sources" works by R.F. Holland and D.Z. Phillips (p. 200), and mentions the names of Rush Rhees, Paul Holmer, Ilham Dilman and H.O. Mounce (p. 65).

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 120.

### Chapter Three

Dewi Zephaniah Phillips (b. 1934) has for much of his career been associated with the University College of Wales at Swansea, where he has been Professor of Philosophy since 1971, and has since 1992 combined this with a chair at the Claremont Graduate School in California, so making him an academic colleague of John Hick - a curious combination given the criticism they have made of each other's work that will be discussed later in this chapter. Phillips was also a student at Swansea, where he was taught by Rush Rhees, a student of Wittgenstein's, and apparently a lifelong influence on Phillips' own ideas. On a number of occasions in the 1940s, Wittgenstein made extended visits to Swansea to see Rhees, as he claimed to find the intellectual atmosphere there more congenial than Cambridge<sup>1</sup>. While it is difficult to know quite what Wittgenstein meant by this, it does mean that Swansea has something of a Wittgensteinian heritage, and so it is appropriate that Phillips is the post-war British philosopher of religion most associated with the attempt to assess the significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to religious belief. It has also meant that he has had to bear most of the obloquy directed at Wittgensteinian Fideism, whether the term really has much relevance to his own philosophical agenda, which he insists it does not. For instance, in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Nielsen describes Phillips as "the arch-Wittgensteinian Fideist"<sup>2</sup>, but his references to him are fleeting, and leaves aside the question of why Phillips rejects such a label. This means that legitimate queries such as what exactly the influence of Wittgenstein is upon Phillips, and whether his utilisation of his work is the only possible one, or even an acceptable one, are not addressed. It may be the case that if Wittgenstein's philosophy is to make any real contribution in this area, then the seeming monopoly of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion that Phillips often seems to have forced upon him may need to be broken. A necessary step in this process is to look at Phillips' work and rather than simply assuming that he is a Wittgensteinian Fideist as most critics seem to do, instead accept his claims to the contrary, and recognise that what he is doing may be Wittgensteinian in some sense, but that it may not be the only form a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion may take, despite some of Phillips' own claims that apparently imply this is the case.

Right from his earliest paper, "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God", which

appeared in 1963<sup>3</sup>, Phillips has been pursuing a particular understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religious belief. As he has republished this paper twice in collections of his essays, the last time as recently as 1993<sup>4</sup>, he must still find the position he adopted at the beginning of his career to be valid. While Wittgenstein is not mentioned explicitly, overtones of what could be called a 'Wittgensteinian' position appear. Phillips opens with the question, "What kind of philosophical and theological account does the concept of divine reality call for?", to which he responds that in such an account, "one must determine the grammar of the concept to be investigated"<sup>5</sup>. He claims that this is precisely what has not happened in the traditional form the philosophy of religion has taken, and this is why the arguments for the existence of God have been a metaphysical confusion:-

Because the question of divine reality can be construed as 'Is God real or not?', it has often been assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over *a matter of fact*. The philosophical investigation of the reality of God then becomes the philosophical investigation appropriate to an assertion of fact.<sup>6</sup>

He insists this has come about because the believer's own use of language has been ignored, and the question of divine reality is taken to be logically the same as the question of the existence of any other 'object' in the world. The difficulty with this is that the question of whether a particular 'object' exists or not is an open matter, but for the believer according to Phillips, the question of God's existence is not so much closed, it simply does not exist: "It is not that *as a matter of fact* God will always exist, but that it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist":-

The believer is not like someone who sees objects when they are not there, since his reaction to the absence of factual evidence is not at all like that of a man suffering from hallucinations. In the case of chairs there is no dispute over the kind of evidence needed to settle the issue. When the positivist claims that there is no God because God cannot be located, the believer does not object on the grounds that the investigation has not been thorough enough, but on the grounds that the investigation fails to understand the grammar of what is being investigated, namely the reality of God.<sup>7</sup>

So one of the main confusions Phillips sees in the philosophy of religion is the inability to take with sufficiently seriousness that when 'existence' and 'reality' are being used in relation to God, they cannot be used in the same way as they would in relation to physical objects within the world. A similar point was of course made by Wisdom, and accepted by Flew and Hick, that both believers and unbelievers could look at the world around them, and agree that

there appeared to be no empirical difference in what they saw, but that this agreement on empirical matters had no effect on their respective beliefs in the existence or non-existence of God.

Phillips goes further, however, in claiming a distinct grammar involved in talking about the reality of God means that "(the) possibility of the unreality of God does not occur *within* any religion", only that "it might well arise in disputes *between* religions", so seemingly removing doubt as a legitimate part of the grammar of religious belief. This claim is also important as it shows that how one "would decide the identity of God is connected in many ways with what it means to talk of divine reality"<sup>8</sup>. One cannot determine if two people are talking about the same God as one could determine if they were talking about the same person:-

To say that one worships the same God as someone else is not to point to the same object or to be confronted with it. How did Paul, for example, know that the God he worshipped was also the God of Abraham? What enabled him to say this was not anything like an objective method of agreement as in the case of two astronomers who check whether they are talking of the same star. What enabled Paul to say that he worshipped the God of Abraham was the fact that although many changes had taken place in the concept of God, there was nevertheless a common religious tradition in which both he and Abraham stood.<sup>9</sup>

This is a common theme in Phillips' work that will be discussed again later because of ambiguities in his own use of it, but for the time being, it is noteworthy as it is used to reinforce Phillips' position that "(the) criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition", because "the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself"<sup>10</sup>. While Phillips has made no use of the Wittgensteinian language about language-games and forms of life in this paper, what he says here does seem to come close to numbers 7 and 8 of Nielsen's 'dark sayings'.

Phillips also seems to accept Nielsen's saying no. 4, as he rejects in this paper what would later be termed a 'foundationalist' understanding of philosophy, as he does not believe that "philosophy has a special role to play ... to seek rational grounds for the existence of God", as "(this) view misrepresents the relation of philosophy to religion. The role of religion in this context is not to justify, but to understand"<sup>11</sup>. However, he explicitly rejects the main conclusion that Nielsen thought derived from his sayings, that religion is thereby made



inviolable from criticism. It is inviolable from philosophical criticism, as Phillips does not believe this to be part of philosophy's function, but it is not free from the criticism of ordinary human beings as they go about their non-philosophical lives. Phillips is explicit that by adopting his philosophical methodology, one has not guaranteed that the only possible answer to questions about the 'truth' of religious discourse is favourable, because by saying "that the criteria of truth and falsity in religion are to be found within a religious tradition is to say nothing of the truth and falsity of the religion in question"<sup>12</sup>. Leaving aside the difficulty that earlier on in the essay, Phillips was discussing the criteria of 'meaningfulness' rather than the criteria of 'truth and falsity', which are surely to be kept distinct, he insists that the clarifications of grammar involved in defining such criteria "is as necessary in explaining unbelief as it is in explaining belief":-

It is because many have seen religion for what it is that they have thought it important to rebel against it. The rebel sees what religion is and rejects it ... Obviously, he does not see the point of religion as the believer does, since for the believer seeing the point of religion is believing ... Nevertheless, he (the rebel) can see what religion is supposed to do and what it is supposed to be ... The rebel stands on the threshold of religion seeing what it must be like, but saying, 'I do not want to be like that. I rebel against it all'.<sup>13</sup>

So from the beginning of Phillips' work, there is some difficulty in determining whether what he is saying about the nature of philosophy in relation to religious belief has the implications that Nielsen is criticising.

In another significant early paper, "Religion and Epistemology: Some Contemporary Confusions", which first appeared in 1966<sup>14</sup>, Phillips explicitly invokes Wittgenstein's influence, arguing that philosophers in their attempts to talk about 'knowledge' of God are guilty of confusing religious and epistemological questions. By ignoring what is said about God in its appropriate context, and instead trying to find some general epistemological criteria that are unequivocally applicable to 'reality' in general, philosophers end up distorting precisely what is unique and significant about religious belief. One of the philosophers he mentions is John Hick, and in particular he takes him to task for the criticisms he made in 1964 of the 'autonomist' position. Phillips is obviously aware that these criticisms could be applied to his own position, but claims that Hick's talk about the dangers of seeing religion as "a speech activity having meaning only within its own borders", and so depriving "religious statements of 'ontological' and 'metaphysical' significance"<sup>15</sup> is itself dangerous.

This is because, Phillips claims, it is unclear what 'ontological' and 'metaphysical' are supposed to mean, and that Hick appears to believe that "religious truth, like most other kinds of truth, must be measured by its conformity with or deviation from certain facts"<sup>16</sup>. Presumably for Phillips, this means, in the words of his 1963 paper, that Hick is in danger of construing God's existence "as a matter of fact", in the sense it can be "taken for granted that the concept of God is at home within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world", whereas "to ask a question about the reality of God is to ask a question about *a kind of reality*, not about the reality of *this* or *that*"<sup>17</sup>. As he puts it in "Religion and Epistemology", this risks making the question of God's existence to mean "existing as human beings do, or perhaps as the moon and the stars exist"<sup>18</sup>, as though it is the kind of question that could be answered by a straightforward empirical investigation. However, Phillips does not acknowledge that Hick in accepting the challenge of the Wisdom/Flew parable had already seen that was not possible

In the 1966 paper, Phillips tries to defend his position against Hick's criticism that the 'autonomist' is bound to limit "the logical implications of religious statements" completely within that "fragment" of the universe that is "religious speech of human beings"<sup>19</sup>, but what he says is not actually clear enough to decide if he has freed himself of this charge. He claims Hick has confused "*conditions* of intelligibility with the *content* of what is said", so that while Phillips claims religious concepts do only "have their meaning within a certain form of life ... this does not imply that these concepts *say* anything about a form of life":-

The institution of religion is the condition of the possibility of meaning for concepts such as "eternity", "divine forgiveness", "sin", "grace", etc., but the meaning of these concepts, what they say, has nothing to do with institutions ... Religious beliefs may tell one something about everything, but one must pay attention to the grammar of religious language to discover what that something is. Religion is not everything in the universe, but it does not follow that for *that* reason religion does not say anything about the world *as a whole*.<sup>20</sup>

He again insists that the problem is that the question of reality in religion must not be confounded "with the *general question* about the nature of reality in which metaphysicians and epistemologists are interested". Instead the only way to deal with the question "of how knowledge is possible *at all*", is to conduct "an enquiry into the conditions of the possibility of discourse":-

Language ... must exhibit distinctions between following and not following conceptual rules;

it must show that it makes a difference whether one says one thing rather than another. What following a conceptual rule amounts to, what kind of difference saying something makes, can only be elucidated by clarifying the discourse in question. Ultimately, one would have to appeal to the criteria of intelligibility operative in the mode of discourse. Wittgenstein stressed that each mode of discourse is not part of some all-embracing reality; it is what it is.<sup>21</sup>

Phillips claims it is "a complete misunderstanding" on the part of his critics to claim this means God is "being confined to the mode of discourse in which talking to Him and about Him is meaningful", because "(to) say religion does not explain every form of human activity is not to restrict or reject any religious claim. It is simply to reject the view that religion stands in an *explanatory* relation to all other social phenomena. Belief in God is certainly a belief about everything, but that does not mean it is another way of saying everything there is to say"<sup>22</sup>. However, while Phillips is right that to speak of God in a meaningful manner means being in a "religious mode of discourse", it is still unclear from what he says here how exactly this "mode of discourse" is related to all other "modes of discourse", and whether the differences in grammar between them are as absolute as he seems to imply.

In this paper, Phillips does seem to fulfil Nielsen's sayings nos. 5 and 6, as he appears to isolate religious "modes of discourse" from any kind of interaction with other "modes of discourse", and it does seem to derive partially from his acceptance that religion is a form of life. This of course raises the question of how Phillips understands language-games and forms of life, but unfortunately he rarely attempts the kind of close, critical exposition of Wittgenstein's texts that may be necessary to determine what the latter was trying to communicate with these terms. Phillips does, however, at various points in his work try to dissociate himself from the sort of interpretation that could fall prey to Nielsen's criticism, and which he seemed near to in "Religion and Epistemology". For instance in a 1970 essay, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games"<sup>23</sup>, Phillips says he writes "as one who has talked of religious beliefs as distinctive language-games, but also as one who has come to feel misgivings about doing so". These misgivings he claims are partially to do with the problem that "if religious beliefs are isolated, self-sufficient language-games, it becomes difficult to explain why people *should* cherish religious beliefs in the way they do". If religious beliefs were really so compartmentalized from other modes of discourse, they would be "more like esoteric games, enjoyed by the initiates no doubt, but of little significance outside the internal formalities of their activities". However, for Phillips' critics, the misgivings usually centre

on the other problem he recognises, which is that "religious beliefs are being placed outside the reach of any possible criticism, and that the appeal of the internality of religious criteria of meaningfulness can act as a quasi-justification for what would otherwise be recognized as nonsense"<sup>24</sup>. To overcome this, Phillips claims that whatever is meant by referring to religious beliefs as language-games (or forms of life), it must have "to do with the point the activity has in the life of the worshippers, the bearing it has on other features of their lives":-

Religion has something to say about aspects of human existence which are quite intelligible without reference to religion: birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune and misfortune. The connection between these and religion is not contingent. A host of religious beliefs could not be what they are without them. the force of religious beliefs depends, in part, on what is outside religion ... So far from it being true that religious beliefs can be thought of as isolated language-games, cut off from all other forms of life, the fact is that religious beliefs cannot be understood at all unless their relation to other modes of life is taken into account.<sup>25</sup>

From this, Phillips develops the way in which religious beliefs can be legitimately criticised as he said they could right from his very first paper, and such criticism centres on the way the relation between such beliefs and the situations of human life "must not be fantastic". For instance, what such beliefs have to say "about suffering and death can be judged in terms of what we already know and believe about these matters", so that they become fantastic if "they ignore or distort what we already know". Phillips insists that "(when) what is said by religious believers does violate the facts or distort our apprehension of situations, no appeal to the fact that what is said is said in the name of religion can justify or excuse the violation or distortion"<sup>26</sup>.

Phillips makes similar points elsewhere in his work about the impermissibility of using talk of religious beliefs as language-games to try to isolate such propositions from criticism, and that in fact it needs to be recognised that part of their meaning derives from their interrelationship with the way language is used in other non-religious situations. The most substantial discussion of this is in Phillips' 1986 book, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*<sup>27</sup>, in which he claims to rebut the five "theses" he believes his critics mistakenly ascribe to him:-

- 1) "Religious beliefs are logically cut off from all other aspects of human life"<sup>28</sup>,
- 2) "Religious beliefs can only be understood by religious believers"<sup>29</sup>,
- 3) "Whatever is called religious language determines what is and what is not meaningful in



religion",

4) "Religious beliefs cannot be criticised"<sup>30</sup>,

and 5) "Religious beliefs cannot be affected by personal, social or cultural events"<sup>31</sup>.

He rejects the applicability of these claims to his work, by drawing attention to the passages that were quoted above from his work, in which he emphasized the need for interaction between different "modes of discourse" in the ever-changing context of human life. In a later chapter, Phillips in fact argues that the changes which can occur in the cultural context around religious belief may be very radical indeed, because he now says religion is not a form of life, but that "it is impossible to imagine a religion without imagining it *in* a form of life", and that "(what) happens to a religion in a form of life cannot be laid down in advance. It is a matter of its fate in a complex network of influences and counter-influences"<sup>32</sup>. Phillips claims that if one is not to "ignore the relation between (religious) practices and the human life which surrounds them", then "certain religiously comforting pictures have to be abandoned". One of the most significant of these is what he terms "religious individualism":-

Christianity does not belong to the world of time. It is part of the Eternal. The Eternal cannot be dependent on the temporal. Therefore, whatever happens in the secular world which surrounds it, Christianity is eternally safe. There is a direct relationship between the believer and his personal Saviour ... He does not have to worry about what happens to personal relationships, the family, the society or the culture, since the communion between (the believer) and the Saviour is direct, beyond the influence of personal, social or cultural events ... The nature of faith is beyond historical or cultural influences, since that faith is made secure by a transcendent cause, by no less than divine causality itself.<sup>33</sup>

Phillips of course intends this passage to be taken ironically, as it is the position he feels called on to attack as being unacceptable from his philosophical point of view. There are certain things that Christian theologians should take note of because in any theology truly centred on the Incarnation, it should be impossible to speak of any communion with the Saviour that is not partially mediated through "personal relationships, the family, the society or the culture". Phillips is here drawing on Wittgenstein's critique of meaning as something internal, an event that occurs solely in the mind or soul, "beyond historical or cultural influences". If salvation did come from such an ahistorical relationship, then the question could be asked why did the divine Son need to become incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth? Yet it is precisely this Incarnation that Phillips has no place for, by identifying the



belief that faith is 'secured' by a 'transcendent cause' with what he insists needs to be rejected. Putting aside the irony, he continues by directly saying that "there is no necessity about the continued existence of Christianity. There is nothing in the nature of the Universe ... which guarantees this"<sup>34</sup>. Phillips is right that there is nothing in the 'nature' of the Universe guaranteeing the survival of Christianity as an institutional religion, and the Christian has to accept that social and cultural changes have occurred, and will almost certainly continue to occur, that will make the mediation of the Gospel increasingly difficult in our society. But the Christian will cease to be a Christian, if he or she stops believing that God no longer reconciles His children to Himself through Jesus Christ. This raises the real difficulty with Phillips' work, which has nothing to do with his use of Wittgenstein's work, and his understanding of the nature of language-games and forms of life. It is that he does not appear to pay attention to the grammar of what the believer says as closely as he claims, and that what would for many be essential to the grammar of the Gospel appears to Phillips to be distortions that need to be removed. In what Nielsen termed the "first-order discourse" in Christian belief, believers have been promised that the Holy Spirit will always be with them, because of the sacrifice made by the Son. For the believer, it therefore must be 'blasphemy' to consider that the Father would ever abandon His Church after this sacrifice. Phillips is selective in the language he is prepared to take seriously, and avoids the basic difficulty that the Christian tradition has always talked of a God who acts, a God who has revealed Himself.

If what has been considered before in this discussion of Phillips is his understanding of the nature of philosophy, and the role language-games and forms of life play in the philosophical methodology he believes to be appropriate in dealing with religion, then it is essential to also consider what this methodology leads him to say about the 'substance' of religious belief, the language that believers really do use on a day-to-day basis. A useful way into this may be by going back and looking at the criticisms made of what came to be called "Wittgensteinian Fideism" by John Hick. In *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, another "religiously comforting picture" criticised is what Phillips terms "religious rationalism", and it is likely that Hick is one of the philosophers being criticised:-

No matter what cultural changes may take place, the validity of religious belief is secured by formal arguments which transcend the relativity of cultural contexts; arguments such as the

ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the argument from design, all of which prove the existence of God.<sup>35</sup>

For these philosophers, Phillips says, "Reason is one" - what is understood by reason is not dependent upon the different contexts in which the term is used, and so the activity behind the term must also be the same in every context. Part of the attraction of doing the philosophy of religion in this way is that it appears to open up the possibility that a securer foundation for faith than faith itself could be formulated. If the metaphysical certainty of Christianity could be established by showing its compatibility with 'universal' norms of reason, then it appears it would be impossible for it to disappear as it would be based on transcendent 'rational' foundations. However, while Phillips claims that this method of philosophy can distort the nature of religious belief, then his opponents can also argue that his own method does the same, as the meaning he is prepared to accord religious language is 'non-cognitive', in that it cannot be taken as fact-asserting in any sense. Like Braithwaite, he seems to have accepted that if religious language is meant to be fact-asserting, then it is 'meaningless', and that an alternative account of how it can be meaningful needs to be provided. Phillips' work represents a useful reminder that whatever is meant by God cannot be a 'fact' in the way objects in the material world are facts, but as this is one of the implications of the Wisdom/Flew parable, it is difficult to know who he is criticising, unless it is philosophers like Hick because they have tried to meet the challenge, instead of accepting it as unanswerable as Phillips as.

In his 1973 book, *God and the Universe of Faiths*<sup>36</sup>, Hick returned to his criticism of the 'autonomist' position, and focused it directly at Phillips. He concentrated mainly on Phillips' first book, *The Concept of Prayer*<sup>37</sup>, which appeared originally in 1965, and which still seems to be the work Phillips is best known for in theological circles. Hick argued that if Christianity was to be taken seriously in a form continuous with its past, then three theses had to be defended that were threatened by Phillips' approach:

- 1) "that it is presupposed in the christian scriptures, creeds, confessions, prayers, sermons and theologies that it is a factual truth that God exists"<sup>38</sup>,
- 2) "Since Christian discourse affirms the factual reality of God, it gives rise to an entirely proper question concerning the truth or otherwise of this affirmation. For it is always logically in order, in face of a factual claim, to ask if the claim is justified"<sup>39</sup>,

and 3)"Philosophical considerations are relevant to a decision as to whether or not it is reasonable to believe that God exists"<sup>40</sup>.

While the last may be criticised from a Wittgensteinian perspective, it is still the case that Hick was criticising Phillips in these theses at a point the latter seemed intent on ignoring. This was the belief that no matter how different a 'fact' God may be, it still seemed that the grammar of religious, and particularly Christian, belief was trying to *assert* 'something' no matter how imperfectly understood about this 'reality'. In contradistinction to this, in Phillips' conception of this 'reality', assertion of any kind of knowledge distinct from the belief's implications for the way humans live their lives is excluded from the outset as an impossibility. As Hick points out, for Phillips, "there is no proper question whether God exists, in distinction from the question whether people have the concept of God". This is how Hick interpreted a passage from *The Concept of Prayer* where Phillips argued that "(what) he (the believer) learns is religious language; a language which he participates in along with other believers. What I am suggesting is that to know how to use this language is to know God"<sup>41</sup>.

Now Phillips is correct that our knowledge and experience of God is mediated through the religious language and behaviour we learn, but what he singularly fails to do is deal with the problem that believers also claim that God is something more than such language and behaviour. This is what Hick is trying to communicate in his criticisms of Phillips. As he points out, in Phillips' view, atheism must be solely a matter "of the recognition that religion means nothing to one", because "one is at a loss to know what to make of prayer, worship, creeds and so on. It is the form of atheism summed up in the phrases, 'I shouldn't call myself religious', 'Religion has no meaning for me'". Hick argues then that "if this is the only philosophically proper form of atheism then one form that must be philosophically improper is that expressed by: 'It is irrational to believe that there is a God', 'There are no adequate grounds for believing in the reality of God'". If this is so, then "the issue which such atheism professes to settle is not a genuine issue", so "the corresponding contrary conclusion that God does exist, or that it is rational to believe that God exists, or that there are adequate grounds for believing in the reality of God, etc., must also be philosophically out of order". For Hick, this leads to the conclusion that if such questions are logically improper, then by implication one is denying "that the core religious statements, such as 'God loves mankind' or 'God is guiding the universe to his own end for it' are factually true-or-false"<sup>42</sup>. As far as Hick is

concerned the only conclusion to be drawn from this is that religious language has become 'non-cognitive', it does not tell one about any 'reality' that exists extrinsically to the language that is used. As Wisdom had shown in his parable, however, one may be forced to acknowledge that the kind of empirical factors that are usually relevant in determining the reality of something do not apply in the case of God, but that does not mean one can stop asking, "What is right?" or "Which is reasonable?", i.e. that if one does cease to ask such questions, one has abandoned something that is still of central importance in religious language. Hick's problem with Phillips is that he has missed this point in the parable, or rather that he has asked himself these questions, and has decided given the difference between God's 'reality' or 'existence' and the way these terms are normally used, then in relation to God, these terms cannot bear any resemblance to what is meant by empirical 'existence' or 'reality', and so as the traditional sense of God's 'existence' has been interrelated with the empirical senses of the word, what has usually been meant by God no longer exists in Phillips' account. In the traditional understanding which the Wisdom/Flew parable was designed to show, the similarities as well the differences from the grammar about 'empirical' objects are equally inherent in the grammar about God, and one half of this relationship cannot be ditched as Phillips does.

Yet Phillips tries to get out of such difficulties by not recognising that this ambiguity is inherent in language about God, and instead insists that Hick has simply introduced into religious discourse an understanding of 'fact' distorting the true nature of the 'reality' of God and equating it with a physical object. Phillips claimed in his first essay that the question about the reality of God was actually a question about "*a kind of reality*, not about the reality of this or that", and then equating this with the way that "asking a question about the reality of physical objects is not to ask about the reality of this or that physical object"<sup>43</sup>. He develops this further in *The Concept of Prayer*, arguing that talking about "the reality of the physical world" is a matter of "an elucidation of the concept of reality in question", and similarly in religion, what is of concern is "the possibility of giving an account of the distinction between truth and falsity, sense and nonsense" in that particular context:-

This is not a question of experimentation any more than the question of the reality of the physical world, but a concept of conceptual elucidation; that is, the philosophers want to know what is meant by 'real' ('exists') in the statement 'God is real (exists)'.<sup>44</sup>



Hick, however, questions the limits of this analogy, pointing out that "(whereas) everyone is a user of physical object language, so that there is no one in a position to ask seriously whether the world exists, by no means everyone is a user of theistic language, and there are many who ask seriously whether God exists". Hick argues that in the case of the material world, as there is "the context of universal agreement", then "the question about its existence or reality is ... a conceptual question asking for an elucidation of the notion of a material object", but in the case of God, as there is a "context of dispute", then "the question about the reality of God is not only a conceptual question but also a question of fact and existence"<sup>45</sup>. Now the difference between Hick and Phillips is that while Phillips recognises that in the grammar of religious language, the talk of God being 'real' or 'existing' is very different from talking about the reality or existence of any other 'thing', he fails to account for the way that if it is completely different, then the question occurs why should 'reality' or 'existence' be used in relation to God, because if they bear no resemblance at all to how they are used in other contexts they are simply meaningless. Unless there is some similarity between saying 'God is real (exists)' and these terms' uses in other contexts, it is difficult to know what kind of content they are supposed to have. Now with Hick, the problem is that he does not sufficiently recognise the strangeness involved in the language used of God, and that he does risk appearing to make all language, no matter its context, fit into the same conceptual status, but even if there may be reservations about the way he has formulated this matter, he is still correct to point out that no matter how odd talk of God's 'reality' or 'existence' may be, if it is to have any meaning, it must still have some similarities to what is said in other contexts, and that throughout the history of the Christian tradition, it has been acceptable, despite Phillips' claims, to ask for 'reasons' for believing in this 'reality', even if the 'reasons' themselves have been very different from those usually given about the existence of some thing or another. Hick is surely right that the legacy of logical positivism has made it clear that whatever the context of 'existence', it must be in some way definable "in the operational terms of making an experienceable difference", and so "(the) notions of the existence of God and of the factual truth of statements about him are bound up with the principle that any possible history of the universe which satisfies, for example, 'God loves mankind', must differ experientially from any possible history of the universe which does not satisfy it"<sup>46</sup>.



Hick's response to this challenge was of course his idea of eschatological verification, but for Phillips there is no need to meet such a challenge, and he claims it is equivalent to turning religious belief into a hypothesis. In "Religion and Epistemology", in reference to Hick's idea, he claimed it meant that while "(things) may not go well here and now ... unless the ultimate facts, the eschatological situation, are favourable in some sense or other, faith has been a hoax and a failure ... The kind of difference religion makes to life is the difference between a set of empirical facts being or not being the case"<sup>47</sup>. Yet in the case of Christianity, it is surely true that belief in some respects cannot free itself from the problem of whether some set of empirical facts were or were not the case, as Christianity is inevitably tied up with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Unfortunately, Phillips never deals directly with the difficulties raised by the historical aspect of Christianity, but as must surely be suggested now, given what has already been said about his understandings of supposed Christian beliefs, it could be argued that such difficulties are irrelevant for him, as the 'religion' he believes himself to be clarifying the grammar of has little resemblance to Christianity as traditionally understood.

If one begins by looking at his first book, *The Concept of Prayer*, Phillips claims that he will only be discussing examples of Hebrew and Christian prayer, because if one is to "carry out an analysis of religious concepts, some acquaintance with such concepts is essential", and Phillips admits that "(apart) from the Hebrew and Christian traditions, I have very little understanding of the concepts of the various religions"<sup>48</sup>. Yet he also acknowledges that this does not necessarily mean that what he has to say will bear much resemblance to what believers might say themselves about their faith, because while following Wittgenstein's philosophical method in giving an account of religion means one "must pay attention to what religious believers do and say", this does not mean "equating a philosophical account of religion with the account a believer might give of his beliefs"<sup>49</sup>. Phillips claims that the believer is often not the best person to provide a philosophical, 'conceptual' account of what he or she is doing in a religious activity such as prayer, because it is not simply a matter of the believer saying "that praying is talking to God, adoring Him, confessing to Him, thanking Him, and making requests to Him, since what the enquirer wants to know is what it means to do any of these things". So what the believer is being asked for is "a non-religious account of a religious activity, a conceptual or philosophical account which would give some

indication of the meaning of prayer to someone for whom prayer meant little, and often, he (the believer) fails to provide an adequate one"<sup>50</sup>.

If this is the case, then it is not surprising that much of what Phillips says would probably not be accepted by most believers as what they were actually saying, because unlike Phillips, they are not privy to the 'true' grammar of their belief that his conceptual analysis has revealed to him. For instance, in *The Concept of Prayer*, after reiterating his points about the different 'grammar' involved in speaking about the reality of God, Phillips argues that the 'grammar' involved in speaking to God could be expected to be different from that involved in speaking to other people. As the 'nature' of whom one is talking to determines what kind of talk is possible, so with prayer, "the divinity of the object addressed determines the nature of the talk". This bears on what is meant by talking of God as a 'person', as Phillips says the difficulty here is that "this suggests an idea of God as a finite individual", but "the absurdity of this can be demonstrated by recalling the ideas of God's omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, to show how differently His reality is conceived from that of a finite individual"<sup>51</sup>. Phillips develops the idea of the unique 'grammar' involved in talk of God as 'person' to claim that God, unlike other 'persons', cannot be a participant in a shared language as human beings are. For instance, in the case of talking about anger, in such expressions as 'I am angry' or 'He is angry' - "Both 'I' and 'he' in this context refer in their meaning to a common concept of anger. Yet, if we read the words, 'I am angry with my people', where the anger referred to is God's anger, we do not understand anger in this context by virtue of the same kind of shared knowledge of what anger means" but "by understanding a common religious experience, namely, that of being the object of divine wrath". So God can never say 'I am angry', or perhaps more importantly it seems that He cannot 'say' anything at all. In the case of divine anger, Phillips relates this to the fact it is logically impossible to see God in a state of anger:-

Normally, it is the prophet or the teacher who says that God is angry. Even when God's voice is said to say this from the midst of bushes or clouds, there is this necessary non-immediacy, as it were. This is no trivial matter, since what it emphasises is that the 'relation' of 'God' to the concept of anger in the statement 'God is angry' is not like my relation to the concept 'He is angry' made with reference to me. We do not share the concept of divine anger with God in the way in which we share the concept of human anger with each other ... One can have various responses to human anger because when we learn what anger means, we also

learn the relation between it and the circumstances in which it is experienced or expressed.<sup>52</sup>

What this lack of a shared language means, according to Phillips, is that prayer cannot be a conversation, a two-way process, as the common background that is the presupposition for this is lacking.

This naturally raises the question of what exactly prayer is for Phillips, if it is not a conversation of some kind? If one does not enter into relationship with God through participation in a shared language with Him, then what sort of relationship with Him do believers have? The relationship is based on the fact that the religious believer does participate in a shared language:-

He must learn the use of religious concepts. What he learns is religious language, a language which he participates in along with other believers. What I am suggesting is that to know how to use this language is to know God ... God does not participate in any language, but He is to be found in the language people learn when they come to learn about religion.<sup>53</sup>

The first part of this quote is of course what so exercised Hick in his criticisms of Phillips' work, but it is actually the second part quoted here that far more radically undermines any traditional Christian understanding of God. This is because, according to Phillips, once believers have learnt religious language, once they find religious concepts 'meaningful' by knowing how to use them in their lives, then to know what for instance divine anger is, "is to come to view one's life in relation to the will of God, and to recognise the horror of estrangement from it". So that prayer is not in any way a conversation with God, but instead seems to become a curiously one-sided affair in which the believer strains to be 'related' to God, while He remains totally passive. Prayer for Phillips now centres around an 'internal relation', a matter of "talking about what one is in relation to the unchangeable reality of God", a 'reality' that seems inevitably to be oblivious to the believer. For instance, to return to the concept of divine anger, prayer becomes "an internal relation between seeing oneself as the object of God's wrath and what one is becoming as a person. To see oneself as the object of God's anger is to see oneself cut off from the source of one's hope for oneself as a person, namely communion with God"<sup>54</sup>. It is difficult to know quite what communion could mean here if God is such a different 'reality' from humanity, that He is not capable of participating in any mutual relationship with them, such as a conversation. It seems unavoidable therefore to conclude that prayer is something that believers 'do' for themselves,

through mysteriously putting themselves into a particular kind of 'relationship' with God, by comparing themselves to this abstract 'reality' and attempting to improve their lives where they fail to live up to it. If prayer is not in some way a 'conversation', and if God is not saying something to each believer in his or her life, then there can surely be no 'grace' as conventionally understood, and it is difficult to know what the traditional language about God having a personal love and care for every one of his creatures could mean, if the only relationship He has with them is such an abstract one. Prayer for Phillips seems more like a kind of self-contemplation in relation to an abstract 'unchanging reality' that seems unable to know or relate to those supposedly praying to it.

Theological suspicions should also be raised by Phillips' insistence that God could not have a 'biography', because in a sense this is precisely what the revelation history recorded in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures represents, particularly the revelation given in the Incarnation of His Son. It is interesting that Phillips does not deal with the conception of revelation anywhere in the book, as it would seem to be an unavoidable consideration in his argument that God does not 'participate' in any shared language with humanity. Now it is important to see the validity in Phillips' argument that it is only through learning religious language that the believer can come to know God, that this relationship to God can only be mediated through the acceptance of a religious tradition embodied in the life of a particular community; but if one wishes to remain loyal to what this tradition has said, it is unlikely that his claim that God is *only* to be found in the language people learn, and that He actually does not participate in it in any way, can be accepted. Phillips ignores the central importance to the believer of the 'origin' of this language, that it is usually considered to be 'revealed' by God Himself, or at least to be an extension of that revelation. Unless Phillips deals with the 'grammar' involved in talk of a revelatory God, it is difficult to know who or what the God is who he talking about. This makes it even more unfortunate that Phillips caricatures any philosophers who try to raise these issues, by claiming that they want prayer to be a matter of "talking to someone 'out there', who is 'there' in a quasi-physical sense". According to him, they are "hankering after the old spatial model, in terms of which God's reality is likened to the externality of the planets", and that this results from using a model for understanding God deriving "from debased traditions within religious language". These traditions, which Phillips seems more gifted at recognising than other philosophers, produce



"an anthropomorphic conception of God, a God whom one could address as one could address the moon - or better - the man in the moon"<sup>55</sup>. It may, however, be the case that these philosophers are concerned, unlike Phillips, with dealing with the problems raised by trying to address a God who *does* certain things, of a Father who has sent His Son, and of this Son who works to make humanity His brothers and sisters through the Holy Spirit. Phillips appears to be interested in simplifying the tradition for his own interests, which inevitably results in the possibilities he recognises for speaking of God contradicting the way God has been spoken of throughout the past two thousand years in the religious tradition he claims to be drawing upon.

This covert 'demythologising' deriving from his own unacknowledged preconceptions runs throughout Phillips' work, and can only result in a reductionist approach to the Christian tradition that reads into its grammar a non-cognitive position that contradicts what it has tried to say. Phillips tends to dismiss any attempts to point out that the grammar may in fact be different from how he sees it, by claiming it is just the result of conceptual confusions that need to be cleared up. This reductionism is especially blatant in his next book, *Death and Immortality*, published in 1970<sup>56</sup>. Here he claims to be discussing the Christian hope in Eternal Life, but rejects what has been central to that hope by continually identifying it with the various metaphysical theories that have been advanced for the immortality of the soul. As he never discusses the Christian hope in the context in which it has arisen, that of God's promise to the world through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he is able to identify all talk of 'survival' after death with the metaphysical talk about immortality. So he is able to reject all ideas about immortality, as involving philosophical confusions about the 'nature' of the 'self'. Showing Wittgenstein's influence, Phillips argues that the 'self' cannot be "an inner substance, necessarily private, whose existence and nature we must guess or infer from bodily behaviour which is but a pale reflection of the reality behind it". Philosophers have been lead into this by misconstruing the relationship between a person's 'inner' life and his or her 'public' one:-

Persons are not mysterious entities that we never meet directly or have direct knowledge of ... we do meet persons, come to know them to varying degrees, sometimes know them better than they know themselves, share or do not share their private experiences, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

Phillips is not denying that people are "often a mystery to each other", but more importantly



pointing out "that even these features of human existence (i.e. private experiences) depend on there being ways of being ways of life in which people share, which they were taught and came to learn", and without which "there could be no notion of a person":-

To call these common activities, a facade, an outer show, and to contrast them with a logically private reality is a mistake, since without these activities there could be neither reality nor facade.<sup>58</sup>

This insistence that everyday life cannot be treated as a 'facade', as if the important business goes on within our 'transcendent' selves, of course connects with Phillips' insistence that religious concepts, if they are to be 'meaningful', need to be mediated precisely through this everyday life. However, this does not mean the Christian must abandon the legitimate hope in what is vulgarly termed 'survival after death'. Phillips does discuss the resurrection of the body in *Death and Immortality*, and acknowledges that it has in recent decades been appealed to by those theologians and philosophers of religion concerned at the way the 'self' has been presented as an ethereal entity only contingently related to the 'material' world. However, the examples of such work Phillips considers are somewhat limited, being confined to one essay by Peter Geach<sup>59</sup>, and a analogy he makes in passing towards the end of the paper<sup>60</sup>. Geach suggests that Paul of Tarsus' simile of a seed that is planted and grows into an ear of corn could illustrate the relation between the corpse and the body that rises from the dead. Phillips takes Geach to task for this, as "(we) can say that the buried seeds result in the growth of corn because such a process is known and intelligible to us". This is after all "a straightforward empirical question", while "if one asks whether people live after death, is one asking a question of the same logical character?"<sup>61</sup>. The answer is obviously no, and in Phillips' account, Geach's use of Paul's simile could make him prey to Phillips' familiar criticism of transforming the grammar of a religious conception like resurrection into an apparently empirical matter, as this analogy could be interpreted so that the 'process' involved could be compared to a matter of empirical investigation like the growth of a seed. But Phillips uses this cursory critique to reject all accounts of resurrection as meaningless, because it is obvious that resurrection must have a different logical character from other events, and so can be dismissed as meaningless. The question he never deals with is why it should not? If it can be accepted that God's 'reality' has a different grammar because of the way believers speak of it, even if Phillips' account of this is unsatisfactory, then why should

this not be the case with resurrection as well. Phillips as already pointed out never deals with resurrection in the way believers talk about it. For instance, with believers, 'survival after death' is not a 'question', it has nothing to do with the marshalling of evidence for or against a dubious proposition. It is a hope, something taken on trust - trust in God because of what He did for His Son. It is therefore not surprising that Phillips does not even mention the resurrection of Christ, which must surely be strange as it has to be the theological cornerstone of any Christian hope in Eternal Life.

Phillips, however, is disinterested in such matters, and instead prefers to criticise the language often used about what 'life' will be like after death. He comments that hope in this life is "often connected with the hope of seeing loved ones again, of taking up broken relationships, of righting wrongs committed long ago, and so on". He argues that "these activities depend on a continuance not merely of the individuals involved, but of the forms of life in which they participated, and the social institutions connected with these ways of living". Without any apparent irony, he then quotes Jesus' words about there being no marriage in Heaven to support his position. Marriage is a relationship connected to a complex of other relationships - "child-parent relationships, relationships between brothers and sisters, relationships between lovers and so on", so "(if) the situation in which such relationships have their meaning cannot be spoken of except within the context of this human life here on earth, how can one speak of taking up and continuing these relationships after death?"<sup>62</sup>. Yet has this ever really been part of the Christian hope? Has Christianity ever really conceived the life 'beyond' as being exactly like 'life' as we have it now, but presumably with all the nasty elements taken out? This wishing to perpetuate our earthly relationships into the 'spiritual' realm without any radical discontinuity seems more like the saccharine intimations of the 'Sunnyland' beloved of Spiritualist groups, than it does the tradition of the Christian Church. Christianity should always have no choice but to take death seriously, because at its centre stands the Cross, which must represent that God has in some way identified Himself with suffering and death, so as to achieve the death of death. Therefore in any Christian understanding, this 'new' life after death must come out of this, and so it can not be humanity's by right, as it depends completely on the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ Jesus. The Church has then had to recognise that the resurrection life can not be a continuation of this life, in no matter how exalted a form, but it will be a qualitatively

different one through being a life in the presence of God, it then becomes difficult to see why it should be expected to have the same 'logical' character as events in this life, when it has always been the Christian claim that it cannot, precisely as it comes through the resurrection of Christ Phillips in his treatment of resurrection removes all mention of God, and cannot envisage that the believer may not hope to meet his fellows again as mothers, fathers, etc., but as brothers and sisters in Christ, and sons and daughters of the Father. So what the believer will 'know' first and foremost in this life will be God, and through God, all others. After all, what is promised is not merely a continuation of human personal lives, but a 'cosmic' hope in which humanity will participate in 'a new heaven and a new earth'.

This raises the question what then does Phillips conceive a correct conceptual account of Eternal Life or the immortality of the soul to be, if among its necessary presuppositions are the rejection of "the possibility of the survival of disembodied spirits after the death of human bodies, or ... the possibility of non-material bodies living on after the death of material bodies, or ... the possibility of bodies resurrecting after death"<sup>63</sup>. The answer is similar to the kind of analysis he gave about the nature of prayer. Phillips claims that what is meant by the immortality of the soul, once freed from the confusions caused by philosophical 'dualism', is related to the concept of 'soul' he sees in such remarks as 'He was a good soul' or 'I'm sorry for the poor old soul'. His position is that there has been a 'radical confusion' between these 'legitimate' uses and the various 'illegitimate' philosophical uses of 'soul', and its cognates, 'mind' and 'self'. What has happened is that "'Everyman has a soul' has been construed as if it were akin to 'Every man has a heart'", as if it was an 'empirical' question about a quasi-physical entity. Phillips, however, argues that the 'true' grammar of talk about the 'soul' is seen by realising that "(questions) about the state of a man's soul are questions about the kind of life he is living":-

If the soul were some quite distinct entity within a man, it would follow that whatever a man did would not affect it. But this is not how we speak of the soul. The relation between the soul and how a man lives is not a contingent one. It is when a man sinks to the depths of bestiality that someone might say that he has lost his soul. It is a man's relation to what is morally praiseworthy and fine that would determine whether this judgement was applicable or not.<sup>64</sup>

So for Phillips, talk of the 'soul' is "bound up with certain moral or religious reflections a man may make on the life he is leading"<sup>65</sup>. In the believer's case, reflection "on the state of the soul has to do with its possession or lack of spirituality, this spirituality being assessed

in terms of the person's relationship to God"<sup>66</sup>. So what Phillips means by 'spirituality' is based on his understanding of the 'internal relation' he discussed in *The Concept of Prayer*. The believer judges the state of his or her 'soul' against the 'reality' of God - a 'reality' "independent of any given believer, but its independence is not the independence of a separate biography. It is independent of the believer in that the believer measures his life against it"<sup>67</sup>. The God Phillips presents seems to function as some kind of moral 'tape-measure', incapable of establishing any relationship with the believer, but against which he or she measures their own, and other people's, souls to determine their 'spiritual' condition.

As Phillips finds no place in his analysis of the grammar of religious belief, for what has previously been its most distinguishing characteristic - a God in interrelationship with the world He has created and with humanity, one is left with the fact that whatever else Phillips might claim his understanding of religion to represent, it cannot be denied it is a human activity, involving particular language and actions, and nothing else. This is especially plain in his next book, *Religion Without Explanation*, which appeared in 1976<sup>68</sup>. In it, he does something unusual for a philosopher who has been accused of trying to make religion impervious to criticism. He first rehearses the arguments in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* against the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and agrees that Hume has undermined the old philosophical presuppositions that made the traditional arguments credible. Phillips therefore argues that it is now virtually impossible to see how one could move from the existence of the Universe, or from various features of it, to 'proving' the existence of the God one was supposed to be able to 'infer' from this Universe. Phillips is therefore probably correct in saying that there is now nothing startlingly controversial in claiming that "(the) whole notion of a God and another world which we can infer from the world we know is discredited". However, he then goes on to make another claim, which surely undermines all that religious belief has traditionally stood for, and which he also claims perhaps more controversially that 'most' philosophers would now accept, "that the whole notion of a reality beyond the world with which we are familiar is confused"<sup>69</sup>. However, Phillips again seems to be selective in what he looks at in Christian tradition, as while the traditional arguments for the existence of God were for many centuries after Aquinas accepted as an integral part of theology, theology did not actually base its belief in "a world beyond the world with which we are familiar" on inference; more importantly it was



based upon revelation, the claim that this 'reality' had shown itself to the world, and that this world would actually have been incapable of seeing this 'reality' with any real certainty unless it had shown itself forth in this way.

As Phillips believes that Hume's position is unanswerable if religious beliefs are taken to be an attempt to say something about 'another world', he then goes on to outline his own alternative. He contends that religious 'reactions' to the world need not take the form of 'rationalistic' arguments for the existence of God, and one should keep one's mind open to other "intellectual possibilities"<sup>70</sup>. One such possibility is that represented by Phillips' own accounts of the 'reality' of God, prayer and immortality, and these possibilities all consist in seeing 'religion' as a particular kind of 'reaction' to the world encapsulated in a distinct form of human behaviour. It can seem then that Phillips would have no alternative but to recognise his account as being kindred to the reductionist account of religious belief associated with Braithwaite. Yet he does not, in fact he is scathing about Braithwaite, and in *The Concept of Prayer*, he describes the other's position as "hopelessly inadequate"<sup>71</sup>. Although Phillips does not go into a detailed critique of Braithwaite's work, from an earlier discussion in *The Concept of Prayer*, it appears he believes that Braithwaite has not come to terms with what the 'reality' of God really means, which of course means with what Phillips claims this 'reality' to be. Braithwaite has allegedly been confused by the way God can be talked of as 'something', and has failed to see that there are many different kinds of 'something' from God to material objects, and that "what the 'something' comes to will vary with the case in question, and so will the method of establishing whether or not that 'something' is the case":-

In the case of the 'something' men call God, it is clear that it will not dance to the tune appropriate to many of the ways in which we talk of things *which may or may not be the case*.

As a result it is either dismissed as a mistake, or modified until it becomes something other than it claims to be.<sup>72</sup>

For Phillips, Braithwaite is guilty of the latter error, because he still sees the question of God's 'existence' as being in some way related to empirical understandings of 'existence', whereas for Phillips, it can have nothing to do with these. Phillips develops his criticisms of Braithwaite's position further in *Religion Without Explanation*, and while they are still rooted in Braithwaite's supposed inability to understand the 'reality' of God, they take another more interesting turn.



This turn reveals why Phillips claims Braithwaite is a reductionist, but also why he rejects the label as applicable to himself. In Braithwaite's position, the *real* nature and purpose of religious beliefs is to be found in the part they play "as psychological aids to moral endeavour". However, for Phillips, Braithwaite is confused in that he cannot recognise any other alternative for a religious belief, such as the Last Judgment, apart from the choice, where "it must ... be construed as an empirical proposition, such that believing in it is to predict that an event of a certain kind is going to take place some time in the future, or the story of the last judgment ... as a psychological aid to moral endeavour, the question of whether one believes in the truth of the story being unimportant"<sup>73</sup>. Phillips of course believes that his position is a third alternative that avoids the problems of the other two, and that a major problem with Braithwaite's attempt to preserve the meaningfulness of religious language is the "accounting for the relation between the religious stories and moral conduct". In the end in Braithwaite's position, this relation can only be "a psychological and causal one. The stories simply aid a man in his moral resolutions"<sup>74</sup>. For Phillips, that means that there is no essential connection between the language used, and the kind of moral behaviour it is being used to encourage, so that there is the possibility that other 'stories' could come along and render the other language obsolete. So the religious language would be revealed to have been effectively meaningless in itself all along, as what it seemed to be doing could effectively be done in any number of other ways. In *Religion Without Explanation*, Phillips realises that the relation between religious language and the behaviour it inculcates cannot be contingent as it was in Braithwaite's account, and so develops his own alternative that preserves the 'meaningfulness' of religious language to his satisfaction, while insisting it cannot be used as what he terms a 'referring expression', so that it is in no way related to the empirical uses of language that would otherwise always threaten this 'meaningfulness' in more traditional accounts of religious belief.

He does this by presenting religious language as a 'reaction' to the world that has an inherent 'expressiveness' of its own that cannot be expressed in any other way, which is where he and Braithwaite's accounts of religious language do seem to radically diverge. In support of this position, he is able to draw on Wittgenstein's critique of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*<sup>75</sup>. While these notes are referred to in *Death and Immortality*, it seems to have been only around the time he wrote *Religion Without Explanation* that Phillips came to

realise the importance of these notes for his own version of the meaningfulness of religious language, and they have remained a significant influence throughout his later work. These brief notes were dictated by Wittgenstein to his pupil, Rush Rhees (so it is appropriate that they should have been such an influence on Phillips), and they express the irritation he felt at Frazer's interpretation of the primitive religious and magical practices catalogued in *The Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein objected to the way Frazer had presented such beliefs and rituals as primitive hypotheses, as if they had been 'designed' to achieve some end, so being a form of putative causation:-

Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*.

Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the *Confessions*?

Well - one might say - if he was not mistaken, then the Buddhist holy man or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But *none* of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory.<sup>76</sup>

This would naturally appeal to Phillips, but the significance of the notes for him lies in the views Wittgenstein has of what religion is if it is not an attempt to explain phenomena in the world as Frazer thought. The particular religious practice and the views that Frazer considered to be a mistaken theory justifying it in fact "go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there"<sup>77</sup>. This is because both the practice and the views arise because "something strange and terrible is happening here. And that is the answer to the question 'why is this happening?': Because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in this course of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etc., anything but trivial and insignificant, *that* is what gave birth to them"<sup>78</sup>. Wittgenstein is here referring to the sacrifice of the priest-king at Nemi which Frazer discusses, but such dramatic practices actually have their origins in the mundane reality of everyday life, because such 'reality' is actually not so mundane as it seems:-

That a man's shadow, which looks like a man, or that his mirror image, or that rain, thunderstorms, the phases of the moon, the change of seasons, the likeness and differences of animals to one another and to human beings, the phenomena of death, of birth and of sexual life, in short everything a man perceives year in, year out around him, connected together in any variety of ways - that all this should play a part in his thinking (his philosophy) and his practices, is obvious, or in other words this is what we really know and find interesting.<sup>79</sup>

Such phenomena need not be mysterious in themselves, but they take on significance, because they touch upon something in human nature that means they can become 'mysterious', and

for Wittgenstein "it is precisely the characteristic feature of the awakening human spirit that a phenomenon has meaning for it. We could almost say, man is a ceremonial animal. This is partly false, partly nonsensical, but there is also something in it"<sup>80</sup>. It is because there is something in it that Wittgenstein was made angry by Frazer's 'explanations' of primitive practices, because the latter failed to see "that there is something in us too that speaks in support of those observances by the savages. - If I, who do not believe that somewhere or other there are human-superhuman beings which we might call gods - if I say "I fear the wrath of the gods", then this shows that with these words I can mean something or express a feeling that need not be connected with that belief"<sup>81</sup>.

It is the utilisation of this aspect of Wittgenstein's work that justifies regarding Phillips as a Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion, but as it is used to reinforce an understanding of the grammar of religious belief that neither believer nor unbeliever are usually prepared to accept, it does raise the question of whether the Wittgensteinian Fideism label is really of much use in relation to his work. Phillips, following what Wittgenstein had to say in the *Golden Bough* notes, would of course argue that religious belief is something that people will either find 'meaningful' or not in the context of their particular lives, and that philosophy cannot be used to determine if it is 'rational', or in accord with any universally acceptable criteria, but as what he says 'religion' is would not be accepted as such by most proponents or critics of religious, and particularly Christian, belief, it is difficult to know just what to make of such claims when they are made by Phillips. Phillips uses the *Golden Bough* notes to argue that one should look upon religious rituals "as a form of language, a symbolism in their own right; a language and a symbolism which are expressive in character"<sup>82</sup>. Now the notes obviously imply that Wittgenstein also saw them in a similar way, but what is far less certain is whether he saw them solely as that. He was writing as someone who did not subscribe to any established form of religious belief, and so was expressing the way he felt that some kind of 'meaningfulness' could still be felt in many diverse ritual forms if one did not allow oneself to be misled into regarding them as a form of proto-science. However, while Wittgenstein also pointed out that religious beliefs could not be interpreted as if they were empirical propositions, it still seems that he would not have denied that believers felt themselves to be asserting some kind of 'factual' claim in many of their statements, even if he could make nothing of these claims himself. So for him the claims that another kind of

'meaningfulness' could be found in religious practices, by which something of significance about human nature was being expressed, would be merely his own personal recognition that he still felt these matters to be important.

In Phillips' use of these notes, though, this 'expressiveness' now becomes the 'essence' of what religious language and ritual are trying to communicate. Such language is not 'about' anything, but is expressive of certain attitudes towards the events in the lives of the people who use it. For instance, he argues that the greeting of the rising sun among primitive peoples need not be because they believe the ritual they perform 'causes' the sun to rise, but "rather, knowing that the dawning of the day is at hand, they want to express a greeting to it in this way ... the desires and hopes expressed in this way are expressions of all that is of value in this occasion"<sup>83</sup>. Or in another example Phillips uses, why are the dead accompanied to their graves, "(does) that practice rest on an opinion or an hypothesis?"<sup>84</sup>. Phillips claims that people with Frazer's turn of mind looked for an 'intellectualist' explanation for this behaviour, whereby primitive peoples believed the dead had to be accompanied, as it was "the practical means of securing the imprisonment of the dead (so) that they would not return to haunt the living". In Phillips' alternative account, however, "(in) walking to the grave, one may, in the language of gesture, be showing something about the meaning of life and death. We walk to the end with a loved one with whom we have walked in life. Is that any kind of hypothesis? ... What we see in this ritual is an expression of an attitude to life and death". Phillips argues that this means such rituals "are not founded on anything, but express values concerning what is deep and important for the people concerned - birth, death, hunting, cultivation of the crops, personal relations, etc."<sup>85</sup>. Yet it is surely obvious that there are great difficulties in saying that the language of Christian doctrine is simply 'expressive', that it just provides a means of expressing a particular set of values; this language has always claimed to tell the believer 'something' about God, and more importantly that this God in some way has justified this language about Himself. What Phillips' position means is that it becomes difficult to speak about religious *beliefs*, as these beliefs seem to have no 'content' apart from precipitating a certain way of behaving, and it is perhaps not surprising that in *Religion Without Explanation*, Phillips begins to refer more to religious 'reactions' or 'behaviour', than to religious 'belief'.



This understanding of 'religion' as a distinctive form of behaviour has continued in much of Phillips' later work<sup>86</sup>, but perhaps the most useful form of the argument is in Phillips' 1988 book, *Faith After Foundationalism*<sup>87</sup>, as it can be used to best illustrate the difficulties of the position. This is developed from a passage Phillips quotes from a writer expressing a 'feeling' of religious awe in face of a violent storm at sea in which he is caught up<sup>88</sup>. Phillips wants this passage to be an example of what he terms a primitive religious reaction, as the person in the passage is struck by what the storm seems to show of the 'inscrutable' will of God. Phillips claims "the notion of God's will gets its sense *in* such reactions", as opposed to the 'intellectualist' position where 'primitive man' reacts to the storm in this way, "because of a *priori* conclusion he has reached, namely, that because he is not responsible for the storm, someone else, greater than himself, must be responsible", so that the 'religious' reaction is "a *consequence* of previously held beliefs". For Phillips, "(such) a view ignores concept-formation in religious belief. The sense of belief in God is itself rooted in reactions such as the reaction to the storm"<sup>89</sup>. This implies the concept of God's will is not just mediated through such events as storms, but somehow arises directly out of them through certain people's reactions. It has already been discussed that Phillips insists that all religious concepts have to be mediated through the events of everyday life, yet now he claims that the very same concepts in fact have their origin in certain possibilities of behaviour that some people experience in certain situation. He attempts to bring in Wittgenstein to support this position, quoting the line "Language does not emerge from reasoning" from *On Certainty* #475, and going on to argue:-

... we do not reason our way to our primitive reactions concerning pain, colours, sounds. At later, more refined stages, reasons and discriminations become appropriate. Such refinements, however, are dependent on the brute fact that we react as we do - jump with fright, call colours light or dark, call sounds loud or quiet, cry out in pain or express concern or shock at the pain of others. We do not agree to react in these ways. Rather, the fact that we agree shows itself *in* these reactions. The possibility of the development of concepts is rooted in such reactions. Primitive reactions play a central role in enquiries where, we are inclined to think, the interest must emerge from intellectual reflection and experimentation.<sup>90</sup>

Now Phillips is undoubtedly right that if "(language) concerning fear, pain, surprise, causation and perception develops from primitive reactions ... it is hardly surprising, then, that such reactions should be of central importance in magical and religious practices"<sup>91</sup>. However, if the grammar of Christian belief is really to be fully analyzed, for all the



importance of such primitive reactions in all that we think, say or do, it seems unlikely that question of "reasons and discriminations" can be set aside as Phillips appears to believe.

The basic problem is that while fear, pain, surprise, causation and perception are 'primitive reactions', which one can only later reflect on and develop concepts to account for, just how comparable are these really to such culturally complex phenomena as Christianity, or any other major religion, such as Buddhism, or even animism in all its diverse forms? While 'primitive reactions' do undoubtedly play a role in religious behaviour, does this necessarily mean as Phillips claims that there are specifically *religious* primitive reactions that provide the foundation for all the myriad kinds of religious expression that exist? Also if as Phillips claims, "Nature's contingencies ... are seen as expressions of God's will", not because people "first have an idea of God, abstractly defined, which (they) then try to reconcile to such contingencies as their explanation", but because "it is in reacting to such contingencies that believers are lead to speak of human life as being in the hands of God"<sup>92</sup>, how could 'religion' disappear through cultural change as Phillips has argued in *Religion, Change and Forms of Life*. Even those cultural changes that appear to have made the mediation of religious concepts difficult would appear to be limited by Phillips' claim that such concepts arise from 'primitive reactions' seemingly inherent in humanity. There also seems to be a contradiction between Phillips' claim that the concept of God's will can arise from certain reactions in the face of a storm, and the importance of the religious tradition in which the believer learns how to speak of God, which has also been a central element in Phillips' work since "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God". Despite Phillips' insistence to the contrary, it is difficult to know what could be said about the God encountered in the storm, if one did not know a system of doctrine in the first place, because how does one progress from 'primitive reactions' to for instance the Christian conception of God as it has developed over the last two thousand years. It is not immediately apparent that the concepts of the Incarnation and the Trinity are particularly analogous to the concepts formed in the case of other more obviously primitive reactions, such as fear or pain.

Finally, there is also the persistent ambiguity that surrounds Phillips' use of the term, 'religion'. In *The Concept of Prayer*, Phillips claimed he did not intend to draw on any other religious tradition than the so-called 'Judeo-Christian' one, but in much of his work, Phillips

often slides imperceptibly from talking of what he appears to believe is true of all forms of religious belief to what he claims to be the 'true' grammar of Christianity, and then back again. This means Phillips avoids the problem of whether it should not at least be considered whether all the different traditions of religious belief that he sometimes seems to imply his conceptual remarks are equally applicable to, do not in fact have their own grammar? And if Phillips' conceptual analysis of religion has mainly been done in dialogue with Christianity, just how relevant is the grammar he claims to have found there to other very different religions, such as Buddhism and the non-theistic forms of Hinduism? Phillips' work is therefore marred by his unwillingness to engage in the prolonged encounter with Christian dogmatic theology (or any other doctrinal system) that should surely be the result of any serious conceptual analysis of religious language. While his philosophical method supposedly involves him in only describing the grammar of such language, it often appears that he has already decided what this grammar must be like, as he has a firm idea of what 'true' religion must be like. Occasionally in his work, expressions of his own ideas on what should constitute the real nature of religious belief appear:-

We come to God through a *via negativa*, by coming to see that the nature of his will is born not of an external system which gives a point to everything, but of a radical pointlessness in things. It is precisely because there is no reason why things should go as they do in life that there is a possibility of seeing all things as acts of grace, as things bestowed without reference to oneself as the reason for their occurrence ... The seeker of justifications of the ways of God to men wants to know why things happened to him in just the ways they did. The man who comes to see that no such reasons can be found, who sees the givenness of his life as an act of grace, has come to a knowledge of God. But there is much in us that rebels against accepting such knowledge, and so the task of sacrificing ourselves to God is a never-ending one. In so far as believers achieve it, they testify to God's grace working in them.<sup>93</sup>

Of course, it needs to be borne in mind that the God spoken of here is a non-transcendent 'reality', that finds its origin in certain primitive reactions in human behaviour, and so which obviously has no power in any case to influence how things go in the world. This can make the talk of grace confusing in Phillips' work, until it is seen that by 'grace' is meant a dying away to considerations of 'self' which one can come to by recognising the 'reality' of the 'God' he claims to find in these patterns of human behaviour. A good account of this 'grace' is found in *Faith after Foundationalism*, where Phillips is discussing how the concept of God's will can arise through such events as the sea storm already mentioned:-

This notion of God's will is not related to what has happened as a higher explanation ... 'It is the will of God' is not an answer to the question 'Why is this happening?', but one way in which someone may die to the desire to ask the question. The notion of God's will is formed, not in a search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations ... It is precisely in the absence of anything to show why he should perish or survive the storm, that the person comes to see that his own fate is not the primary consideration. Being at the mercy of God's will leads to a sense of wonder, wonder at the contingency of life, the miracle of existence.

Phillips' own religious preconceptions therefore seem to have influenced what he has taken from Wittgenstein's philosophy. It cannot be denied in his discussions of the importance of primitive practices in religious belief, he is following a theme Wittgenstein considered to be important in any attempt to come to understand religious behaviour. But to just use this theme and insist that it is this which has always given religious language its meaning is going too far. Phillips' idiosyncratic reading of Wittgenstein, and its role in his exposition of religion, has probably had the unfortunate effect of discouraging others from taking Wittgenstein's philosophy seriously, and has prevented other possible contributions it might have to make in the philosophy of religion from occurring. Therefore it is important in the next chapter to give a more rounded account of Wittgenstein's philosophy than Phillips does, and by trying to provide a detailed interpretation of what he understood by language-games and forms of life, contribute to the disappearance of the stereotype that Wittgenstein's work inevitably leads to some kind of fideistic insulation of religious language.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an account of Wittgenstein's visits to Rhees in Swansea, see Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pp. 449-449, and especially Chapter 22, pp. 458-470.

<sup>2</sup> *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion op.cit.* p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> In *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, Oct. 1963, pp. 344-350.

<sup>4</sup> It is to be found in *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970, pp. 1-12, and *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Macmillan 1993. pp. 1-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophical Quarterly op.cit.* p. 344.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 345.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* pp.345-346.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 346.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 347.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 350.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> In *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 1966, pp. 316-330.

<sup>15</sup> John Hick, "Sceptics and Believers" *op.cit.* p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> "Religion and Epistemology" *op.cit.* p. 318.

<sup>17</sup> "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God" *op.cit.* p.345.

<sup>18</sup> "Religion and Epistemology" *op.cit.* p. 321.

<sup>19</sup> John Hick, "Sceptics and Believers" *op.cit.* p. 239.

<sup>20</sup> "Religion and Epistemology" *op.cit.* p. 318.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 323.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> This originally appeared in *Ratio* Vol. 12, No. 1, 1970, pp. 26-46, and was then reprinted in *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, pp. 77-110, to which references will be made (and also in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Macmillan 1993).

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p.78.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 97.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> Macmillan 1986, pp. 1-16.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 79.

- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.* pp. 84-85.
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 85.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 90-91.
- <sup>36</sup> Macmillan 1973.
- <sup>37</sup> Routledge and Kegan Paul 1965.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 25.
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p. 27-28.
- <sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p. 29.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Concept of Prayer op.cit.* p. 50.
- <sup>42</sup> *God and the Universe of Faiths op.cit.* p. 26.
- <sup>43</sup> "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God" *op.cit.* p. 345.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Concept of Prayer op.cit.* pp. 22-23.
- <sup>45</sup> *God and the Universe of Faiths op.cit.* p.28.
- <sup>46</sup> *ibid.* pp. 26-27.
- <sup>47</sup> "Religion and Epistemology" *op.cit.* p. 319.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Concept of Prayer op.cit.* p. 27.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.* pp. 2-3.
- <sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.
- <sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 43.
- <sup>52</sup> *ibid.* pp. 47-48.
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid.* pp. 50-51.
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p. 51.
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 57.
- <sup>56</sup> Macmillan 1970.
- <sup>57</sup> *Death and Immortality op.cit.* p. 5.
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid.* pp. 5-6.



- <sup>59</sup> Peter Geach, "Immortality" in *God and the Soul*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1969, pp.17-29.
- <sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p. 28.  
It is probable that Geach would feel himself being misrepresented by Phillips, as he does not seem to regard himself as advancing a theory, but trying to present a image by which the possible relationship between this life and the next might be symbolized.
- <sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p. 14.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p. 16.
- <sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p. 18.
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p. 44.
- <sup>65</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p. 45.
- <sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p. 55.
- <sup>68</sup> Blackwell 1976.
- <sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p. 21.
- <sup>70</sup> *ibid.* p. 25.
- <sup>71</sup> *The Concept of Prayer op.cit.* p. 68.
- <sup>72</sup> *ibid.* p. 13.
- <sup>73</sup> *Religion Without Explanation op.cit.* p. 142.
- <sup>74</sup> *ibid.* p. 141.
- <sup>75</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, Brynmill Press 1979, to which all references will be made here. Phillips is using the version in *Religion Without Explanation* that appeared in *The Human World*, No. 3, May 1971.
- <sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p. 1.
- <sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.
- <sup>78</sup> *ibid.* p. 3.
- <sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p. 6.
- <sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p. 7.
- <sup>81</sup> *ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> *Religion Without Explanation op.cit.* p. 35.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Significant examples are "Wittgenstein's Full Stop", which was written for an academic conference in 1976, and so would have been researched during the same period as *Religion Without Explanation*, but which was not published until 1981 in Irving Block ed., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Basil Blackwell, pp. 179-200, and which also appeared in a slightly amended form as Chapter 2 (pp. 17-41) of *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*; and "Primitive Reactions and the Reactions of Primitives", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1986, pp. 165-180. Both are reprinted in Phillips' 1993 collection, *Wittgenstein and Religion*.

<sup>87</sup> Routledge 1988.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.* p. 280.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* p. 281.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* p. 325.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* p. 327.

<sup>92</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, Macmillan 1991, p. 209.

<sup>93</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*, Macmillan 1986, pp. 82-83.

## Chapter Four

One of the major problems with D.Z. Phillips' work is that he does not often enough make the kind of close, critical exegesis of Wittgenstein's elliptical, and occasionally obscure texts that most other writers on Wittgenstein usually find to be necessary. The meaning of these texts can only be teased out in such sustained exposition, if one is not going to end up with the kind of simplistic stereotype of his work that lied behind the Wittgensteinian Fideism debate. This is especially the case if one is going to understand what Wittgenstein meant by the terms, language-game and form of life, and this inevitably involves first trying to formulate what form of activity Wittgenstein regarded philosophy as being. A convenient place to start looking at what he thought philosophy was (or more accurately what it *should* be) is by dealing at greater length with one of the sections Nielsen saw behind one of his 'dark sayings':

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.

For it cannot give it any foundation either.

It leaves everything as it is. (P.I. 124)

There is a great deal beneath the surface of these words that needs to be carefully dug out, because as was discussed earlier in Gellner's critique, they can seem like an attempt to abandon all responsibility on philosophy's part to say anything about what goes on in the world, as though philosophy has nothing to contribute of any significance to the way human beings go about their lives. Many philosophers have understandably only took P.I. 123 at this surface level, as they already had their own definite understanding of what philosophy is, and they were unimpressed by the idiosyncrasy with which Wittgenstein often presented his own view. Hick and Nielsen appear to be two such philosophers, which certainly did not help in their adopting the role of expositors of Wittgenstein's possible influence on the philosophy of religion. Both, being apparently willing to remain with analytic philosophy in a more verificationist form, seemed to be very concerned about finding foundations for particular uses of language, which Wittgenstein rejecting as being any of philosophy's concern. So both seemed to be looking for an Archimedean point to adjudicate the factual status of language that Nielsen laments would be destroyed by the monadic

modes of discourse-cum-forms of life he sees advanced by his fideists.

Wittgenstein had undoubtedly come to see philosophy as being a very different kind of activity, but it was not the kind of conceptual relativism that Hick and Nielsen seemed to fear. Wittgenstein's understanding of what philosophy should attempt to do is well expressed in a paper by Anthony Kenny that appeared in 1982<sup>1</sup>. He presents the position that Wittgenstein appeared to have two different, seemingly contradictory, views of philosophy - on some occasions comparing philosophy "to a medical technique, to a therapy, a method of healing", on others, he talks of it "as giving overall understanding, a clear view of the world"<sup>2</sup>. The first view is typified in such a remark as P.I. 255 - "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness". This remark is made somewhat cryptically after a paragraph in which Wittgenstein discusses the philosophical prejudice that sees the term 'identical' as being somehow a more exact version of the phrase, 'the same':

As if we were talking about shades of meaning and all that were in question were to find words to hit on the correct nuance. That is in question in philosophy only where we have to give a psychologically exact account of the temptation to use a particular kind of expression. What we 'are tempted to say' in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. Thus for example, what a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical *treatment*. (P.I. 254)

This hidden temptation is of course the 'illness', and philosophy's function is to attempt to bring this 'repressed' inclination into the open. The 'medical treatment' Wittgenstein had in mind as a comparison was psycho-analysis, and just like modern psychiatric practitioners, he is prepared to use different techniques to deal with different problems - "There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies". (P.I. 133) As Kenny puts it, what Wittgenstein is doing in his work is "a form of psychoanalytic therapy, in that something which is a *repressed* bit of nonsense in my mind is then made *explicit* nonsense":

I give expression to it, just as in a Freudian treatment I make explicit my repressed emotions: this is part of the way of being cured of the bad results of the repressions<sup>3</sup>.

For instance, to expand on the example of the philosophy of mathematics mentioned in P.I. 254, one can turn to analogous comments in *Philosophical Grammar*, where

Wittgenstein describes the irritation his work in this area causes the professional mathematician:

(The mathematician) has always been trained to avoid indulging in thoughts and doubts of the kind I develop. He has learned to regard them as something contemptible and, to use an analogy from psychoanalysis (this paragraph is reminiscent of Freud), he has acquired a revulsion from them as infantile. That is to say, I trot out all the problems that a child learning arithmetic, etc., finds difficult, the problems that education represses without solving. I say to those repressed doubts: You are quite correct, go on asking, demand clarification! (P.G. pp. 381-382)<sup>4</sup>

Kenny points out that this therefore appears to make the role of philosophy purely negative - "Philosophy, it seems, is only useful to people who are sick in some way; a healthy person ... has no need of philosophy", a view that would seem simply bizarre to the traditional 'metaphysical' conception of philosophy "as building great systems"<sup>5</sup>. Yet Wittgenstein sees this destructive function as being healthy precisely because it undermines these 'great' systems:

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (as it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand. (P.I. 118)

He put this even more bluntly in a remark contained in one of his unpublished typescripts written in the 'thirties - "All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making any new ones - say out of 'the absence of idols'"<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, Wittgenstein also put forward his other view of philosophy, apparently contradicting the first, as it accorded philosophy what seems a very 'positive' function - "a view of philosophy as giving a special kind of understanding, of giving a very general view of the world, an overall understanding"<sup>7</sup>. It is the view summed up in P.I. 122:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. - Our grammar is lacking in perspicuity ... The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.

As Kenny comments, this "seems much more like some of the traditional, almost



imperialistic, views of philosophy than the mere therapeutic view"<sup>8</sup>. Wittgenstein even described his philosophy as a search for 'essences' - "in these investigations (we) are trying to understand the essence of language - its function, its structure". However, he immediately qualified this, so denying his kind of analysis had any metaphysical pretensions, by claiming that in 'traditional' philosophy, the 'essence' is "not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out". (P.I. 92) So the 'overview' Wittgenstein wants is not about finding something hidden, but about rearranging what is already in front of one and showing that the form one assumed it had was in fact an optical illusion.

This leads back to P.I. 124, and its claim that all philosophy can do is describe the actual use of language, so that what philosophers have been confused about is the structures they tried to uncover by digging around in what they believed to be the foundations of language. Further light is thrown on these ideas by P.I. 109, which is in the same group of remarks, where Wittgenstein claims that in philosophy, "(we) may not advance any kind of theory":

There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanations*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise these workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

Kenny finds here the reconciliation of the 'therapeutic' and the 'overview' conceptions of philosophy, as philosophy is therefore nothing over and above the philosophical problems caused by confusions about the way language works, and the removal of these confusions by forcing one to look at language from a different perspective<sup>9</sup>. So philosophy is for Wittgenstein, in an etymologically precise sense, a totally 'superficial' activity, and if this is all that philosophy can be, then P.I. 124's

insistence that it cannot provide foundations becomes inevitable. This in fact provides the only real discovery that philosophy can make - "the one that makes me capable of stopping philosophy when I want to - the one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question"<sup>10</sup>. If philosophy cannot provide foundations, and this is supposed to be a source of peace, then as Kenny points out, Wittgenstein "is attacking the view that philosophy is something you have to do before you can do anything else; the view that until philosophy has been gotten over with nothing else is reliable". If like Hick and Nielsen, for instance, one seems to subscribe to a foundationalist conception of philosophy, then "you cannot stop philosophising whenever you want to; until you get these roots dug in, until you get these foundations built, you cannot do anything else, so it would be irresponsible for the philosopher to stop"<sup>11</sup>.

Yet this new understanding of philosophy seems to have as many problems as the ones it is supposed to replace. Wittgenstein used a metaphor involving a fly-trap common among the Austrian peasantry to describe the purpose his philosophy was supposed to perform - "What is your aim in philosophy?- To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (P.I. 309) His contemporary, Gilbert Ryle provided an apt riposte to this - "What has a fly lost, who never got into a fly-bottle?"<sup>12</sup> As Gellner also claimed, Wittgenstein's view of philosophy seems to isolate it from a concern with our everyday life, and so to make it a subject only of interest to that small minority who dedicate themselves to such arcane matters. Kenny, however, furnishes a quote from one of the unpublished manuscripts to show that Wittgenstein still believed what he was doing had got far wider implications than it appeared - "Philosophy is a tool which is useful only against philosophers and against the philosopher in us". The important phrase is of course "the philosopher in us", as Wittgenstein believed that everybody had acquired certain philosophical prejudices through the confusions that inevitably arise in one's culture in reflecting on the use of language. In another manuscript he remarked, "In our language there is an entire mythology embodied"<sup>13</sup>, and it is a fair assumption that he saw philosophy's role to be found in making this 'mythology' explicit, so that it could be seen for what it was. In Kenny's words, "An ordinary person, a simple human being who takes no interest in philosophy, has as a

user of language, a temptation to all kinds of philosophical misunderstandings. If he is lucky these will not harm him at all; certainly they will not harm him when he is going about his daily business", but these temptations could make him "vulnerable to the persuasions of the bad philosophers and the bad scientists"<sup>14</sup>. However, Kenny fails to bring out the significance of these 'temptations' that Wittgenstein believed 'bad scientists' had been responsible for, and which produce in Wittgenstein's work an antipathy to science, when it is presented as an all-encompassing ideology to provide the answers to all of life's problems. This apparent antipathy to science may have inadvertently played a part in fostering the idea among Wittgenstein's critics that he saw religion as a logically self-sufficient realm, impervious to any empirical considerations.

If one looks at the texts of Wittgenstein's published since his death, he does at times come perilously close to claiming that the problems his method of philosophy was especially designed to deal with were in some way solely the creation of the modern scientific world-view. While he knew perfectly well that many of the problems he wanted to 'dissolve' had their roots in the origins of Western philosophy (in the work of Plato, for instance), his belief that Western culture was going through tremendous changes, as the result of the Industrial Revolution, meant that he believed new prejudices were being produced that would be very difficult to dislodge. Wittgenstein therefore came to conceive his new way of doing philosophy as enabling those individuals capable of appreciating its 'spirit' to transcend these prejudices and perhaps see possibilities of human value that were currently being denied. For instance, in a draft preface written in 1930 for a work that was never completed, Wittgenstein announced:

This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This is not, I believe, the spirit of the main current of European and American Civilisation. The spirit of this civilisation makes itself manifest in the industry, architecture and music of our time ... and it is alien and uncongenial to the author. This is not a value judgement. It is not, it is true, as though he accepted what nowadays passes for architecture as architecture or did not approach what is called modern music with the greatest suspicion ... But still, the disappearance of the arts does not justify judging disparagingly the human beings who make up this

One cannot help but feel that Wittgenstein is being disingenuous here, and that he is indeed making the kind of value judgement he denies he is. In fact, the passage goes on to show that he accepted to some extent the distinction Oswald Spengler had made in *The Decline of the West* between a 'civilisation' and a 'culture'. Wittgenstein believed that the society he lived in had ceased to be a 'culture', so significant artistic endeavour could no longer be expected, and "genuine strong characters simply leave the arts aside and turn to other things and somehow the worth of the individual man finds expression". But in the modern age, "forces become fragmented and the power of an individual man is used up in overcoming opposing forces and frictional resistances; it does not show in the distance he travels but perhaps only in the heat he generates in overcoming friction"<sup>16</sup>. It seems likely this was the position Wittgenstein saw himself occupying, and that his philosophy, to him, was an attempt to overcome the 'frictional resistances' generated by ingrained philosophical prejudices in the 'popular' culture around him, and that while he was generating a lot of heat, he was sceptical this could be converted into light that might provide others with illumination. As he stated in the conclusion to the 1930 preface, "I realise then that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value, yet the fact remains I have no sympathy for the current of European civilisation and do not understand its goals, if it has any"<sup>17</sup>.

The significance of these sentiments as a motivation behind Wittgenstein's later philosophy are underlined by a gnomic comment that appears in the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations* - "It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another - but of course, it is not likely" (P.I. p. viii). The pessimism expressed here seems the same as that of 1930, except now Wittgenstein does not even bother to try and clarify what this "darkness of the time" might be, leaving the reader to try to wrestle the meaning of this phrase from the *Philosophical Investigations* itself. However, from other comments spread throughout the mass of manuscripts and typescripts he produced in his late period, it is clear that the current in Western

civilisation he found himself so antipathetic to, was the dominance of scientific methodology, as its very success in producing technological advances had undermined other very different ways of thinking. In particular, 'bad scientists' had been responsible for the promulgation and entrenchment of various related ideologies of 'scientism'. Whether Wittgenstein had in mind his former discussion partners in the Vienna Circle is uncertain, but he certainly thought one of the most pernicious effects of such 'scientism' was the way it had been responsible for undermining many areas of human value, proclaiming them to be meaningless because they did not conform to criteria laid down by scientific methodology. In *The Blue Book*, dictated to his Cambridge class in 1933-1934, Wittgenstein alleged that behind many philosophical problems there was what he termed "the craving for generality", and among its causes was "our preoccupation with the method of science". By this, he meant "the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalisation":

Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive'<sup>18</sup>.

Ignoring the hyperbole about science being the source of metaphysics (as after all metaphysics had existed long before science as we know it), this passage does help clarify P.I. 124, as it shows that Wittgenstein had come to reject the kind of analysis he had advocated in the *Tractatus*. Part of the problem may be that hypotheses in science are very different from the 'hypotheses' put forward in philosophy. In science, hypotheses are developed in a mutual interaction with empirical investigation, so that a hypothesis undergirded by inadequate investigation will eventually be overthrown; but in philosophy to even attempt to go down this road will result in confusion, as advancing any hypothesis involves some kind of generalisation, and Wittgenstein questions whether there are in fact any criteria by which philosophers can determine the cases they should use to build this generalisation on, and which they can afford to ignore.



The "craving for generality" which is produced by this aping of science is therefore also characterised by Wittgenstein as "the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case". Generalisation is such a dubious undertaking in philosophy, because it is only possible on the basis of the belief that "in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications", but this "has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term"<sup>19</sup>. And he turns to an example that perhaps suggest that "the craving for generality" has in fact far deeper roots than the scientific revolution of the past few centuries - "When Socrates asks the question, 'What is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge"<sup>20</sup>. From this, Wittgenstein obviously believes that if one is to answer Socrates' question, then all one can do is to enumerate the different cases, as this is the 'therapy' that is needed if one is to be freed from the numerous theories about the nature of knowledge that philosophers have been tempted into. The temptation to crave "generality" would of course be the error that Wittgenstein saw the advocates of verification/falsification falling into, as they had privileged a particular understanding of 'knowledge', that of the natural sciences, and had proceeded to divorce the kinds of 'knowledge' found there from any context and claimed them as paradigmatic for all meaningful statements. During a conversation with a former pupil in 1948, Wittgenstein had said that he had considered as the motto for the *Philosophical Investigations* the line, "I'll teach you differences" from *King Lear*<sup>21</sup>, and it would have been a very effective illustration of what he saw the role of his work to be in an intellectual climate that had become cramped and distorted by misguided assumptions.

One of the elements in our culture he believed had been cramped and distorted in this way was religion, as it is clear that Wittgenstein saw Western religion as an integral part of the old Western culture, whose dissolution he lamented so much. Such religion was obviously intrinsically connected to the art, music and architecture of that old culture, and Wittgenstein deeply appreciated it for that, and for the moral seriousness it had helped to inculcate. However, it is reasonably certain that Wittgenstein himself was agnostic about the question of the reality of God, and from

his fragmentary writings on religious questions, it is difficult to ascertain with any certainty what he thought of the fact-asserting claims that many religious statements appear to have. It seems his own interest in religion was more as one of those sources of human value that the ways of thinking propagated by science were helping to erode, and which he felt were far more profound than those science was replacing them with. Judging by Braithwaite's Eddington Lecture, if one is able to presume some influence by Wittgenstein, his own personal views on the significance of religious belief for human culture may not be that different from his former 'pupil', and therefore Phillips' position may have been of interest to Wittgenstein, but he would probably have recognised more clearly than Phillips that believers were also trying no matter how inadequately to say something else as well.

However, it is now necessary to deal with the question of how Wittgenstein believed his talk about language-games and forms of life fitted into this understanding of philosophy. It seems that this talk was designed to be part of a technique for bringing the 'repressed prejudices' that cause philosophical problems out into the open. While religion has most frequently been compared to a form of life, it is in fact the term, language-game, that first puts in an appearance in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and as Nielsen in his 'dark sayings' was not particularly concerned to distinguish between the two, it may not be inappropriate to begin with language-games. The *Philosophical Investigations* opens with a passage from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, which is then almost immediately followed by what one later discovers to be the first language-game, and as this example has generated a certain amount of controversy, it seems logical to begin here the discussion of what Wittgenstein understood such 'entities' to be. The debate about the language-game in P.I. 2 arose from a paper published in 1960 by Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein's former pupil, and Phillips' teacher at Swansea. In this paper, entitled "Wittgenstein's Builders"<sup>22</sup>, Rhees discusses some of the problems he feels arise from this passage in P.I. 2:

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones, there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab',

'beam'. A calls them out; - B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. - Conceive this as a complete primitive language.

Rhees' intention in writing is to show the difficulties that he claims will occur if one takes this final sentence seriously, as he is concerned by the limitations he sees in the analogy Wittgenstein appears to be making between language and games. If the language-game in P.I. 2 is taken as a "complete primitive language", then for Rhees, Wittgenstein would be saying that "any language (i.e. the whole gamut of things humans say to one another) is a family of language-games", and as "any of these might be a complete language by itself", Wittgenstein has left open the question "whether people who might take part in several such games would be speaking the same language in each of them"<sup>23</sup>. Rhees believes that if language-games such as P.I. 2 are regarded as "complete languages" in themselves, then a common language that could be used to communicate between such language games would become impossible. After all, if games are analogous to language, then as "the 'cases' of games (i.e. each individual game) are all games themselves; and of course ... do not *make up* a game", then "(different) languages would not make up a language either"<sup>24</sup> - i.e. if one could take all the games that exist and attempt to integrate them together, one would not end up with one vast supra-game, but simply with chaos. Rhees comments that this "shows that I am pushing the analogy in a way it was not meant to go"<sup>25</sup>, but instead of taking the hint and looking elsewhere for what Wittgenstein was trying to do, he continues pushing in this direction. He claims that the problem with the builder-tribe is "not to imagine a people with a language of such a limited vocabulary", but "to imagine that they spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all"<sup>26</sup>.

Even if the words are used in training the children of the tribe as Wittgenstein describes in P.I. 6, Rhees is still certain these people would not have a 'language' in our sense, as all the words would be were "signals which cannot be used in any other way"<sup>27</sup>. For Rhees, "it seems as though Wittgenstein has described a *game* with building stones, and not the sort of thing people would do if they were actually building a house"<sup>28</sup>. Rhees insists that these signals could only be a 'language' if the

words were used in other contexts, as after all in a 'real' language, "the expressions are not just part of one particular routine".

Their uses elsewhere have to do with the point or bearing of them in what we are saying now. It is the way in which we have come to know them in other connections that decides whether it makes sense to put them together here ... The meaning that they have within this game is not to be seen simply in what we do with them or how we react to them in this game.<sup>29</sup>

If this were not the case, one would have the prospect of a language where conversation would be impossible, surely an unusual kind of language by any standards. The person who had been taught the particular 'games' in P.I. 2 would be incapable of using words anywhere except within these 'routines', as conversation is only possible where the person "in trying to tell you something and trying to understand your answer ... *is* getting a sense of how different remarks have a bearing on one another"<sup>30</sup>. Rhees believed these problems had arisen because Wittgenstein had seemingly forgotten his own realisation that language only acquires meaning through its use in the life of a human community:

(The) activity of the builders does not give you an idea of a people with a definite sort of life. Do they have songs and dances and festivals, and do they have legends and stories? Are they horrified by certain sorts of crimes, and do they expose people to public ridicule? The description of them on the building site, if you add 'this may be all', makes them look like marionettes.<sup>31</sup>

Rhees' fear that language-games could be taken as logically discrete entities into which human language is divided up is therefore similar to the worries Nielsen and Hick have about language-games, though in the case of the latter pair, they seem to believe they can refer to far larger entities, such as the entire religious 'mode of discourse'. But both are afraid that it could mean religion could become logically divorced from all other human activities, just as Rhees is concerned that language-games would have no interaction with each other.

One way of responding to these criticisms has been to continue pushing the analogy in the direction Rhees himself said it did not want to go; a perfect example of this is Norman Malcolm's "Language-Game (2)"<sup>32</sup>. He tries to defend the builder-tribe's limited vocabulary as being a credible language by using a passage from *Zettel*,

which seems to suggest that Wittgenstein himself felt the inadequacies of his builder-tribe. Rhees was one of Wittgenstein's literary executors, but as *Zettel* was not published until 1967, it is possible that he had not seen this passage when he wrote his paper:

(On language-game no. 2) 'You are just tacitly assuming that these people *think*, that they are like people as we know them in *that* respect; that they do not carry on that language merely mechanically. For if you imagined them doing that, you yourself would not call it the use of a rudimentary language'.

What am I to reply to this? Of course it is true that the life of those human beings must be like ours in many respects, and I said nothing about this similarity. But the important thing is that their language, and their thinking too, may be rudimentary, but that there is such a thing as 'primitive thinking', which is to be described via primitive *behaviour*.<sup>33</sup>

What Malcolm draws from this passage is the reassurance that the tribe's non-linguistic behaviour will ensure that they need not function in an unrealistic, mechanical manner as Rhees argued, as "in their natural, unlearned behaviour they will express desire, hunger, fear, anger, surprise, disappointment, satisfaction, joy and so on - just as we do"<sup>34</sup>. Malcolm believes that imagining the builders have a full panoply of such behaviour will enable one to see that their building-activity is far closer to the human norm, as they will be able to show by their facial expressions and bodily demeanour, surprise or anger if their orders are disobeyed, or puzzlement if they do not know how to go on in their work, even if it is impossible for them to verbalize their problems.

Malcolm also hoped that this would overcome Rhees' problem that the words of the builder language would be meaningless unless they were used in other contexts, as Rhees argued that unless they were, there would be no criteria to distinguish between sense and nonsense in their use in this particular context, because such criteria could only come about through interaction in many different contexts. Malcolm proposed to overcome this with the example of a worker building a wall:

Only slabs are used in walls; beams are used only in roofs. We may even suppose that beams *cannot* be used in walls because of their shape. Now this builder, at work on a wall, calls out to his helper 'beam'. The helper looks at him in astonishment - then bursts into laughter. The startled builder looks at the helper, then at the wall,



then back at the wall, then back at the helper with a grin of embarrassment. He slaps himself on the head, and then calls out 'slab'.<sup>35</sup>

Malcolm's point is that the distinction between sense and nonsense in many circumstances cannot simply be a matter of linguistic usage as Rhees seems to have presented it, but must also be determined by non-linguistic behaviour in particular situations. It is uncertain, however, whether Malcolm has been more successful in making the builder-tribe any more credible as a human community. Malcolm has accepted that it is impossible for the builders to have any conversations in their 'language', but he wants to claim that the exchange he has described is 'similar' to it:

... the astonishment and laughter of the helper was a 'criticism' of the builder's utterance. The latter's response was an acceptance of the criticism. Rudimentary thinking occurred on both sides, thinking that was exhibited in the rudimentary behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

He also went on to claim that a more realistic background to the builder-tribe could be postulated with a little imagination, that would enable one to see how they could function with such a minuscule vocabulary:

... they do not have a word for food because nature supplies them with food in abundance, ready to hand; no planning or preparation is needed. When one of them is ill those who perceive it express concern in instinctive sounds and helpful actions. When they bury their dead, they bow their heads, and there is some weeping; but there is no other ceremony, nor is there prolonged grieving, etc. etc.<sup>37</sup>

While this argument about the realism of the builder-tribe, and whether their vocal emissions constitute language, has continued<sup>38</sup>, it is not necessary here to pursue its development any further. Rhees should have taken far more seriously his recognition that the analogy between language and games did not seem to want to go in the direction in which he forced it. This suggests that Wittgenstein's view of the function this analogy was supposed to perform in this context made it irrelevant that the ordinary games people play are discrete entities that cannot be amalgamated into one huge supra-game, again indicating that looking at the concept of language-game in this way is irrelevant to what Wittgenstein was trying to do. The problem with both Rhees' and Malcolm's attempt to explain P.I. 2 is that they consider it possible "to imagine a people with a language of such a limited vocabulary"<sup>39</sup>, as if Wittgenstein were indulging in some kind of anthropological speculation. Whether or not it is

feasible that a people with such a vocabulary could have existed at some point in the past two hundred thousand years among the more immediate ancestors of our species is surely not what Wittgenstein is wanting to get us to think about. Yet Rhees and those who have debated with them on this matter have talked as if the significance of the builder-tribe is in some way analogous to this. The fundamental mistake that Rhees *et al.* make is that they totally abstract P.I. 2 from its context within the *Philosophical Investigations*.

This context is the opening quote from Augustine's *Confessions*:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out ... Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.

The philosophical significance of this passage is Wittgenstein's concern in P.I. 1: for him, it "gives us a particular picture of the essence of human language", in which "the individual words in language name objects - sentences are combinations of such names", so that this 'picture' creates the idea - "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." It is in the context of this picture of language, that Wittgenstein's builder-tribe make their entrance. Augustine has not spoken "of there being any difference between kinds of words"<sup>40</sup>:

If you describe the learning of language in this way, you are ... thinking primarily of nouns like 'table', 'chair', 'bread' and of course people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of words as something that will take care of itself.

The builder-tribe represent the kind of context that would have to be imagined for this 'picture' of language to be correct, and this is not a connection that Wittgenstein leaves the reader to decide for themselves, as he prefaces the entrance of the builders with the words, "Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right". Strangely enough, neither Rhees nor Malcolm makes any mention in their respective papers of P.I. 1, and the entire argument concerning whether the

builders' speech is a 'language' would perhaps have been avoided if they had proceeded to look at P.I. 3:

Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises 'Is this an appropriate description or not?' (i.e. of language) The answer is; 'Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe (i.e. the whole of language).

As this follows immediately after his request that one should conceive the builders' four words as a 'complete language', it seems obvious Wittgenstein recognises Rhees' difficulties with his tribe perfectly well, but they are part and parcel of the picture of language he wants the builders to illustrate.

Fortunately, a paper has recently appeared - "Working with Wittgenstein's Builders" by Douglas Birsch and Jon Dorbolo<sup>41</sup> - which has bluntly pointed out the problems with the way Rhees and Malcolm take this particular language-game. The function of the game is to raise questions about the nature of language, so the sort of questions that Rhees uses to criticise P.I. 2 are precisely what it is meant to show up as being wrong in Augustine's conception of language. For instance, Birsch and Dorbolo point out that in the language-game, "the words do correspond to objects, but the words are not being used to name objects":

They are used by A to get B to bring the appropriate stone. The connection between the word and object involves the activity in which the builders are engaged. The builders example allows us to see that the word/object model of meaning is too simplistic.<sup>42</sup>

It is "too simplistic", because B's fetching the correct stone need not be because he actually *knows* that the word in question is a 'name' for the stone, as this assumes that he could conjure up an image of such a stone in his mind, by checking off various images against the name until he finds the one that corresponds with it, and then going off to check this image against the stones that are available. Instead it may simply be a Pavlovian reaction that occurs whenever he hears that word, so that the word functions as a command, rather than as a 'name'. As Birsch and Dorbolo argue, one does not just miraculously come to associate a sound with a particular object, and it

is precisely this association Wittgenstein is exploring "by suggesting that what he calls the 'ostensive teaching' can establish an association between a word and an object, but that this would not always come to the same thing":

He wants us to see that the ostensive teaching must connect to a training which shows the future builder why the word is said or how to respond to its being said. With a different training the same 'ostensive teaching' would bring about a different understanding.<sup>43</sup>

So the lack of any sense of human community in the builder-tribe, which would be the basis for such training, and the absence of which leaves this building work such a strange, ethereal activity, is intentionally absent - Wittgenstein *wanted* the builders to look like marionettes. It is meant to show that "(hooking) up a name to something or a sound to an object is only a beginning. What we do next will depend on the activity in which we are engaged and the training we have received"<sup>44</sup>. The builders have to be "an austere example ... to show how limited such a system of communication must be ... for the builders, there are no meals, parties, marriage ceremonies, or problems on the job. There is nothing else in their life except ordering building stones ..."<sup>45</sup>. So in Rhees' case, complaining about the absence of such activities, and in Malcolm's, trying to claim that they are in some way present in the background of the example, obscures what Wittgenstein was trying to do with his tale about the builders and their superficial existences. According to Birsch and Dorbolo, his procedure is to begin "with a sparse example and then make simple additions. With each addition, we see how varied and complex are the things we do with words"<sup>46</sup>. So the purpose of the language-game is to get one to see that the assumptions one approaches language with need to be examined - the language-game therefore functions as an heuristic tool with which Wittgenstein attempts to give his reader a new perspective on something he or she may take for granted.

It is then unlikely that in Wittgenstein's understanding language-games resemble the monolithic 'modes of discourse' that Nielsen presented them as being in his "Wittgensteinian Fideism" paper, and so one is left in some doubt how much relation there is between Nielsen's "dark sayings" and what Wittgenstein was trying to do in the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, it should be remembered that the problem arose, because Nielsen had come across the claim that religion was a form

of life, and that as a form of life was what Wittgenstein described as a 'given', it simply had to be accepted, as did its apparent synonym, the language-game. He cannot be blamed for acquiring this idea, as it seems the root of Wittgensteinian Fideism may lie in the very influential *Memoir* that Norman Malcolm<sup>47</sup> produced in 1958 about his old teacher. In it, during a discussion of Wittgenstein's religious views, Malcolm announced, "I believe that he looked on religion as a 'form of life' (to use an expression from the *Investigations*) in which he did not participate, but with which he was sympathetic and which greatly influenced him"<sup>48</sup>. Even after the rise of the debate about Wittgensteinian Fideism, when one would have thought Malcolm would have been more careful in his comments, he was prepared to bluntly state in a symposium published in 1977 - "Religion is a form of life; it is language embedded in action - what Wittgenstein calls a 'language-game'. Science is another"<sup>49</sup>. Yet one does not have to go far in the first few pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* to find fairly strong evidence that this term was not used by Wittgenstein in a way that seems compatible with referring to a vast, variegated historical and cultural construct such as one of the world's great religions.

In P.I. 23, during his introductory development of language-games, Wittgenstein sets his readers a test by asking them to consider the language-games to be found in such activities as these:

- Giving orders, and obeying them-
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements-
- Reporting an event-
- Speculating about an event-
- Forming and testing a hypothesis-
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams-
- Making up a story; and reading it-
- Play-acting-
- Singing catches-
- Guessing riddles-
- Making a joke; telling it-
- Solving a problem in practical arithmetic-
- Translating from one language into another-
- Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.



This list has often been presented as examples of what Wittgenstein saw as being language-games, but he plainly said language-games are to be found *in* these activities, and as the list is prefaced with the comment that the term, language-game "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity or of a form of life", it seems very likely that these activities are supposed to be seen as forms of life. If this is so, then leaving aside what Wittgenstein meant by placing praying into the list (and what indeed he understood by praying), it is difficult to see how complex social and cultural phenomena like the great religions could be taken to be what he understood by forms of life. It took a surprising length of time for someone to point out the difficulties this passage's implications presented for the view of forms of life Nielsen was presenting in his "dark sayings" of Wittgensteinian Fideism. It was not until a *New Blackfriars* piece in 1982 by Fergus Kerr<sup>50</sup> that the problems were cogently stated, and were taken up two years later by Nicholas Lash in a piece in *Theology*<sup>51</sup>.

Kerr argued that if P.I. 23 was taken seriously then "nothing could be plainer than the *level* of micro-activities with which Wittgenstein is concerned when he speaks of 'forms of life'", as the term could only be taken to refer to "the open-ended multiplicity of social skills embodied in our workaday interaction with one another and consequently with things"<sup>52</sup>. So if forms of life are "primitive, biological and physical interactions such as pleading, caressing, saluting, teasing and so on"<sup>53</sup>, it is difficult to see how Malcolm could have extended the term to include religious belief in his *Memoir*, as this is hardly the same sort of 'primitive reaction'. Kerr is able to marshal some interesting support for his claims about what kind of activities forms of life should be seen as being - Norman Malcolm himself. In a 1954 review of the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>54</sup>, Malcolm said that a good example of Wittgenstein's understanding of a form of life would be "the gestures, facial expressions, words, and activities that constitute pitying and comforting a person or a dog"<sup>55</sup>. If this is the case, then as Kerr points out, the most that could be said about religion from this understanding of form of life is that "(there) might ... be certain language-involving social interactions without which religion could not exist"<sup>56</sup>. If these are the sort of 'micro-practices' that Wittgenstein wanted the term, form of life, to indicate, the

question arises of what exactly his interest was in such practices. Again Malcolm can be of help, as he claimed in the same review that the term was directing one's attention to the background that needs to be described if one wishes to understand how a 'concept' is used - "we must obtain a view of the human behaviour, the activities, the natural expressions, that surround the words for that concept"<sup>57</sup>.

For instance, if one wishes to understand the 'concept' of certainty as it applies to a prediction, say in relation to the belief that one would burn oneself if one put one's hand in the fire, then "(the) nature of my certainty ... comes out in the fact that 'Nothing could induce me to put my hand into a flame' (P.I. 472). That reaction of mine to fire shows the *meaning* of certainty in this language-game". But if certainty is here based on an instinctive reaction, then how is it to be justified? - "Don't I need reasons?":

Well, I don't normally think of reasons, I can't produce much in the way of reasons, and I don't feel a need of reasons ... Whatever was offered in the way of reasons would not strengthen my fear of fire, and if the reasons turned out to be weak I still wouldn't be induced to put my hand on the hot stove.<sup>58</sup>

So Wittgenstein means that what human beings say and do is 'justified' by how they *live* - "What people accept as a justification - is shown by how they think and live" (P.I. 325). In Malcolm's words, "If we want to elucidate the concept of justification we must take note of what people *accept* as justified":

... and it is clearly shown in our lives that we accept as justified both the certainty that fire will burn and the certainty that this man is in pain - even without reasons ... As philosophers we must not attempt to justify the forms of life, to give reasons for *them* - to argue, for example, that we pity the injured man because we believe, assume, presuppose, or know that in addition to the groans and writhing, there is pain. The fact is, we pity him!<sup>59</sup>

Or as Wittgenstein put it, in the words that gave Nielsen such trouble - "What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - *forms of life*" (P.I. p. 226).

A similar understanding lies behind the account of forms of life that Fergus Kerr gives in his 1986 book, *Theology after Wittgenstein*<sup>60</sup>. He quotes the passage from Wittgenstein's notebooks from which the above remark seems to have been

developed:

... the fact that we act in such-and-such ways, e.g. *punish* certain actions, *establish* the state of affairs thus and so, *give orders*, render accounts, describe colours, take an interest in other's feelings. What has to be accepted, the given - it might be said - are facts of living.<sup>61</sup>

For Kerr, it is clear that instead of trying to find the 'atomic' simples in language and the world he was looking for in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein has now come to see that what is 'atomic' is "the endless multiplicity of small scale and ubiquitous social practices", so that in his later philosophy he presents the reader with a vision of "life as a weave":

How could one describe the human way of behaving? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of human beings as they interweave. What determines our judgement, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.<sup>62</sup>

According to Kerr, this background is "the swarming carpet of human activity", that "cannot be captured in any representation", which probably explains why it has been so difficult for commentators to give an account of what Wittgenstein was trying to do with his talk of language-games and forms of life. Even as sympathetic a commentator as Anthony Kenny has said that "(Wittgenstein) does not give any general account of what a language-game is, nor a criterion of individuation for language-games ... He merely makes some general remarks about language-games, and otherwise illuminates the concept principally by giving a fund of examples"<sup>63</sup>. For Kerr, this is not a problem, as the fund of examples that make up forms of life and language-games are there to function as reminders that "we are agents in practical intercourse with one another":

- not solitary observers gazing upwards to the celestial realm of the eternal forms, or inwards at the show in the mental theatre. What constitutes us as human beings is the regular and patterned reactions that we have to one another. It is in our dealings with each other - in how we *act* - that human life is founded.<sup>64</sup>

It should be plain therefore that Wittgenstein meant by language-games and forms of life, 'entities' very different from the monadic, logically insulated 'modes of discourse' Nielsen presented in his 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' essay. In fact, it is

highly misleading to even refer to these heuristic tools as being 'entities' at all, as they did not have any distinct 'ontological' existence for Wittgenstein apart from their use in disposing of philosophical problems. This can become more comprehensible if one attempts to specify the particular functions Wittgenstein put them to in the dissolving of philosophical confusions than Kerr was willing to do. In a useful paper, "The Coherence of the Concept 'Language-Game'"<sup>65</sup>, John Churchill argues that the fund of examples that make up language-games (and the forms of life that lie behind them) have their "own complex sort of coherence *and* a supple utility in the investigative exposition of language for philosophical purposes"<sup>66</sup>. He claims to distinguish within Wittgenstein's later work, three distinct but interrelated uses of such examples, though there is no reason to assume that Wittgenstein himself ever bothered to so systematically distinguish between the ways in which he was using language-games. Churchill's paper may only deal directly with language-games, and while it is important to realise that these and forms of life are meant to indicate different aspects of a philosophical problem, and so should be kept conceptually distinct, they are intimately related as part of the same philosophical 'technique', so what Churchill has to say is of interest in understanding both terms.

The first use of language-games that Churchill discusses is what he describes as 'heuristic models', a function that is already familiar as it is the role P.I. 2 performs. Wittgenstein believed philosophical prejudices were the result of people not being able to see properly what they were doing with language, as he put it in P.I. 122 :

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of words.- Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.

Such intermediate cases are what Churchill has named 'heuristic models', and the root of Rhees' and Malcolm's misunderstanding of P.I. 2 is that such models "need not faithfully reflect the complex inter-relations among various sorts of ordinary language":

They are occasional devices, explicitly *not* meant to be accurate representations of usage; the purposes for which they are employed demand that they be more or less

simplified, exaggerated and confined. Otherwise the reader's attention would not be focused on the aspect meant to be displayed.<sup>67</sup>

So while Birsch and Dorbolo made this point in relation to P.I. 2, Churchill's demarcation of the different uses is important, as it brings out that throughout his later work the only significance language-games have for Wittgenstein is in the *function* they perform, and that if they are taken to be of importance in themselves, then disastrous misinterpretations will follow.

If 'heuristic models', for instance, are regarded as studies of how language *actually* works, then confusion will reign, producing the kind of sterile debate such as that which arose from Rhees' "Builders" paper. Wittgenstein is not interested in proscribing how language *should* function, as he had gone down that road in the *Tractatus*, which means that the intermediate cases - "(our) clear and simple language-games" - should not be seen as "preparatory studies for a putative regularisation of language - as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance":

The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities. (P.I. 130)

In fact, the common image of Linguistic philosophy as being solely concerned with ordinary language and trying to explain the way it functions is something of a misnomer with regard to Wittgenstein, as he was only concerned with such language because of the role it plays in producing and also overcoming philosophical prejudices. However, analytic philosophers, whose concern such ordinary language should be, can appear to be more concerned with trying to reduce the "friction and air resistance" that using language will inevitably produce, and so still apparently desiring an "ideal language", as they end up simplifying the complexity of the way language is used, which can lead them to misunderstand the "heuristic" type of language-game as some kind of contribution to this project. Yet from the time of *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein had made plain his distrust of any attempts to construct an "ideal language", as he had tried to do in the *Tractatus*, and that if he seemed to be indulging in such an enterprise it was from very different motives:

It is wrong to say that in philosophy we consider an ideal language as opposed to an ordinary one. For this makes it appear as though we thought we could improve on



ordinary language. But ordinary language is all right. Whenever we make up 'ideal languages' it is not in order to replace our ordinary language by them; but just to remove some trouble caused in someone's mind by thinking he has got hold of the exact use of a common word.<sup>68</sup>

The rest of this passage should be noted by all those still tempted to continue the debate on the builder-tribe from the point of view of Rhees and Malcolm:

That is also why our method is not merely to enumerate actual usages of words, but rather deliberately to invent new ones, some of them because of their absurd appearance.<sup>69</sup>

The second way in which talk of language-games functions is as "a general interpretative paradigm for the understanding of language"<sup>70</sup>. Rhees was therefore correct about Wittgenstein making an analogy between language and games, but he made a mistake in attempting to use P.I. 2 to put flesh on the bones of this analogy. He should have instead looked to P.I. 65 if he had needed enlightenment about how this analogy should be understood. Here Wittgenstein imagines an interlocutor asking him to provide the "essence" of language, which he had attempted to do with his theory of "logical form" in the *Tractatus*:

You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language.

The analogy with games is introduced to show what kind of unity language does have, to show that there is no longer a "cast-iron" logical structure common to all linguistic forms - "I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, - but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways". As Wittgenstein says in P.I. 66:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?  
- Don't say: There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'.  
- But *look and see* whether there is anything common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!

If one does look closely one will "see a complicated network of similarities

overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail". The phrase Wittgenstein uses in P.I. 67 to describe this new understanding of "general form" is "family resemblance" - "For the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc., overlap and criss-cross in this way". This is the "general interpretative paradigm" that Wittgenstein now uses to understand language, it is the picture of language that Wittgenstein wants to put in place of the Augustinian picture he began the *Philosophical Investigations* with. Wittgenstein uses this new picture to argue that no one formula can show the "essence" of how words acquire their meaning, instead it must be accepted that many different kinds of relations exist between words and their meanings, and that what constitutes such meanings can not be reduced down to some common "essence" either.

This use of language-game therefore lies behind the constructive aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophical enterprise - the different perspectives from which he believes language and the complex of philosophical problems around it need to be observed, if such problems are to be seen for what they are. The importance of these perspectives is also the basis of the third use of language-games, where they are used to refer to an "investigative device", which Churchill calls a "clarifying description" (echoing P.I. 124 and 133). This is meant to show that while "there are 'countless' kinds of sentences or kinds of use of sentences, Wittgenstein aims not at cataloguing the kinds comprehensively, but at the production of clarity about their use"<sup>71</sup>. It occurs when Wittgenstein tries "to describe - or simply allude to - the pattern of use typical of some word, kind of word, or kind of sentence. Such remarks also delineate the scope of a language-game by stating which moves may be made and which may not; what further things it makes sense to say or ask, and which not"<sup>72</sup>. The reasoning behind this approach is shown in P.I. 116:

When philosophers use a word - 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' - and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? - What we *do* is to bring the words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

Another such word is consciousness, and in bringing this word back to its "everyday

use" in P.I. 416 and 417, one has an important example of a "clarifying description":

'Human beings agree in saying that they see, hear, feel, and so on (even though some are blind and some are deaf). So they are their own witnesses that they have *consciousness*'. - But how strange this is! Whom do I really inform, if I say 'I have consciousness'? What is the purpose of saying this to myself, and how can another person understand me? - Now, expressions like 'I see', 'I hear', 'I am conscious' really have their uses. I tell a doctor 'Now I am hearing with this ear again', or I tell someone who believes I am in a faint 'I am conscious', and so on.

It is in this sort of context that talk of consciousness has its day-to-day home, which makes a statement such as "I perceive I am conscious", which at first sight seems unexceptional, at closer inspection become for Wittgenstein, philosophically dubious:

- But what are the words 'I perceive' for here? - Why not say 'I am conscious'? - But don't the words 'I perceive' here show that I am attending to my consciousness? - Which is ordinarily not the case. - If so, then the sentence 'I perceive I am conscious' does not say that I am not unconscious, but that my attention is disposed in such-and-such a way.

But isn't it a particular experience that occasions my saying 'I am conscious'? - *What* experience? In what situations do we say it?

Such situations would of course be those that Wittgenstein indicated in P.I. 416, where a person has either been knocked unconscious, or is at least thought to have been - the phrase, "I am conscious", therefore seems only to have meaning in such everyday contexts if it is kept in relation to the possibility of being unconscious. This makes it difficult to see the relevance of many philosophical uses of consciousness, where it becomes reified into an ethereal entity totally divorced from one's physical condition, which is what being conscious and unconscious obviously are in ordinary usage.

A 'clarifying description' therefore not only "describes a region of language as a language-game", but as P.I. 416 and 417 illustrate, "includes remarks about the way certain speech activities typically go, or about how they must go. The articulate structure of the language game is described for detailed contrast and comparison with other ways of speaking"<sup>73</sup>. So it is used to draw "attention to the local peculiarities that contribute to the grammar of expressions in each locality", and this can create the impression "that Wittgenstein's language-games divide and subdivide language into a multiplicity of separate 'games', each logically isolated from the others"<sup>74</sup>. It is this

impression that contributed to Rhees' criticism of the builders example, as he believed Wittgenstein intended the apparent logical insularity of P.I. 2 to apply to all other language-games as well, and which of course has given rise to the whole concern about Wittgensteinian Fideism, if such isolation was also applicable to religious belief. Churchill suggests that when dealing with the clarifying use of the term, the metaphor used in P.I. 18 should be borne in mind:

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

Churchill argues "Wittgenstein's discussions of the nature of language suggest that relatively discrete, clear-cut language-games may be discernible only here and there in the pattern of language, like the regular suburbs in the metaphor of the city in P.I. 18"<sup>75</sup>. So that "(the) core of our ordinary language, like the ancient central city, may be a maze of inter-related streets and boroughs, susceptible of different orderings for different purposes"<sup>76</sup>. The important thing to always remember with language-games is that they are designed to serve a purpose, the ordering they make of language is purely pragmatic; it is designed to make the reader realise a certain philosophical problem is illusory, and it is "not meant to divide language into mutually exclusive compartments"<sup>77</sup>. As Wittgenstein said in P.I. 132:

We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of the many possible orders; not *the* order.

Somewhat later in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he explains why this is so with another metaphor:

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about. (P.I. 203)

To continue in this metaphorical vein, language-games and forms of life could therefore be described as the sign posts Wittgenstein sets up to try to prevent his readers getting lost in this labyrinth.

If this interpretation of Wittgenstein is correct, then it has some interesting implications for the account of D.Z. Phillips' work in the last chapter. It seems that

Phillips has been prescient in his later work to dissociate his understanding of the meaning of religious language, from the view that language-games and forms of life could be identified with entire modes of discourse, and instead to try to base it upon the kinds of primitive reactions between human beings that the talk about language-games and forms of life was actually designed to bring out. While he may not be explicit in making the connection that forms of life and language games are interpretive devices intending to get the reader to think about the way language, and its meaning, is held in place by the 'primitive' ways human beings interact with each other, it is surely the implication of much of what he says. However, one of these primitive ways in which human beings react is to refer to things in the world around them, though Wittgenstein makes it clear, for instance, in his account of the builder-tribe in P.I. 2, that referring in language is a far more complex business than one would sometimes want to believe. Phillips follows a possible, but perhaps limited interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Golden Bough* notes, so that the language used in religious rituals is justified in a way that can be in no sense referential, yet as was argued in the last chapter, here he may be mistaken, and that believers are making precisely the sort of 'mistake' that he is trying to save them from in his account of the meaningfulness of religious language. Religious language, for all its peculiarities, may be impossible to save in this way, because if part of its meaning is derived from its interaction with other 'modes of discourse', then the way it tries to refer may be dependent for its force on the way we refer in more straightforward, 'empirical' language. It is in the area of the similarity that religious language may have to try to preserve with other uses of language, a similarity that may have to go deeper than Phillips allows if its 'grammar' is to be truly respected, that the vision of how language has meaning given by Wittgenstein may have its most radical implications.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Kenny, "Wittgenstein on the Nature of Philosophy", in Brian McGuinness ed., *Wittgenstein and His Times*, Basil Blackwell 1982, pp. 1-26.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *ibid.* p. 3.



<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> MS 214, p. 413, quoted in *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> MS 213 p. 431, quoted in *ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* pp. 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 13 - no source given.

<sup>13</sup> MS 219, p. 11, quoted in *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> MS 213, p. 425, quoted in *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 19-20.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Rush Rhees ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford University Press 1984, p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> In the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 60, 1959-1960, pp. 171-186.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p.171.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* pp. 177-178.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* pp. 179-180.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* pp. 180-181.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* pp. 184-185.

<sup>32</sup> In D.Z. Phillips & Peter Winch eds., *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*, Macmillan 1989, pp. 35-44.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, § 99.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm *op.cit.* pp. 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* pp. 42-43.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* pp. 43-44.

<sup>38</sup> Raimond Gaita in "Language and Conversation: Wittgenstein's Builders", *Wittgenstein: Centenary Essays*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 28, 1991, pp. 101-115 has defended Rhees' view of the 'inadequacy' of the builder-tribe against Malcolm's position, and Malcolm has responded to Gaita in "Language Without Conversation", *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 1992, which must be one of the last pieces of work Malcolm completed before his death in 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Rhees *op.cit.* p. 177.

<sup>40</sup> It has been argued in a paper by Patrick Bearsley - "Augustine and Wittgenstein on Language", *Philosophy*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 1983 - that Augustine's understanding of language is more complex than Wittgenstein allows. This may be the case, but Wittgenstein's concern was not with Augustine's considered philosophical pronouncements, rather he was interested in the picture of language that Augustine revealed when he was "off guard".

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Birsch and Jon Dorbolo, "Working with Wittgenstein's Builders", *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Oct. 1990, pp. 338-349.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* pp. 339-340.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p. 340.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p. 341.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 345.

<sup>47</sup> Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition 1984.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* p. 60.

- <sup>49</sup> Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief" in S.C. Brown ed., *Reason and Religion*, Cornell University Press 1977, p. 156.
- <sup>50</sup> Fergus Kerr, "Wittgenstein and Theological Studies", *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 63, No. 750, 1982, pp. 500-508.
- <sup>51</sup> Nicholas Lash, "How Large is a 'Language-Game'?", *Theology*, Vol. 87, No. 1, 1984, pp. 19-28.
- <sup>52</sup> Kerr *op.cit.* p. 501.
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> Norman Malcolm, "Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*", originally published in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 63, 1954, and reprinted in George Pitcher ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan 1968, pp. 64-103.
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 91.
- <sup>56</sup> Kerr *op.cit.* p. 502.  
Phillips of course had also come to emphasize the importance of such 'primitive reactions' as the basis of the meaning in the language used in different situations. Although his exposition is not as straightforward as Kerr's, it could be argued that he had made the same point as Kerr as early as 1976 in his "Wittgenstein's Full Stop" essay, which was not published till 1981 in Irving Block ed., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*.
- <sup>57</sup> Malcolm, *Philosophical Investigations op.cit.* p. 91-92.
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 92.
- <sup>59</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Basil Blackwell 1986.
- <sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p. 64 - quoting from § 630 of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. II, eds. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, Basil Blackwell 1980.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.* pp. 64-65 - quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, sect. 567-569.
- <sup>63</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, Pelican 1975, pp. 164-165.
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p. 65.
- <sup>65</sup> John Churchill, "The Coherence of the Concept 'Language-Game'", *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Oct. 1983, pp. 239-258.
- <sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p. 242.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p. 244.

<sup>68</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* p. 50.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* pp. 250-251.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* p. 251.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* p. 252.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* pp. 252-253.

## Chapter Five

After the kind of analysis made of Wittgenstein's work in the previous chapter, one is therefore in a better position to ask what is the significance of his 'therapeutic' understanding of language-games and forms of life as heuristic devices for the meaningfulness of the complex phenomena that is religious language. The first thing to recognise is through the application of these devices, Wittgenstein's later method of philosophy had come to eschew foundationalism in any conventional sense, as statements no longer acquired their meaning because they could be analyzed into their constituent parts, which could then be given a referent to corresponding constituents in 'reality', but were now regarded as meaningful through being held in place by the way human beings had come to interact with each other in the stresses and strains of daily life. So like Quine, Wittgenstein had moved to a kind of holism, but unlike Quine, our everyday statements do not face as a "corporate body" the "tribunal of sense-experience", so much as the tribunal of the way human beings simply act in relation to one another in the whole plethora of uncontroversial, everyday social situations. If one returns to Quine's metaphors about the totality of human beliefs, where he presents them as being a man-made fabric or a field of force, Wittgenstein's talk of forms of life could be interpreted as referring to the boundary conditions of such a field, as he believes it is the way human beings have come to react in social situations that would hold the field of our language and what it communicates in place. It could then be said that certain of our language-games would be directly based on such boundary conditions, but as knowledge becomes more abstract, and the language-games move further away from the boundary into the centre of the field, this relation to the forms of life becomes more indirect and difficult to identify. Such 'language-games' further into the field could be those that make up for example the dogmas of religious belief or the hypotheses of theoretical physics, but they would not be independent from forms of life holding the field in place, because, as Quine claimed, a conflict with experience, which could be interpreted as a change in the forms of life at the periphery, will result in readjustments further into the field. In Quine's view, this was because of the 'logical interconnections' between what is on the boundary of the field and what is at the centre, and a similar idea can perhaps be seen in



Wittgenstein, as those changes in those language-games very obviously based on forms of life would have an effect on other language-games within the field with which they had a 'family resemblance'. It may therefore be the case that Nielsen's fear that talk of language-games and forms of life would make particular uses of language isolated from all others was in fact just the opposite of what it would actually do, as language-games and forms of life in reality bring out the way that different uses of language only have meaning because they are interrelated with each other, and are all held in place by the way human beings act towards one another in community. It may therefore be the case that Wittgenstein's philosophy, despite apparent protestations to the contrary in the fragmentary writings on religious belief he produced, could actually be used to present a challenge to the meaningfulness of religious language

It is therefore necessary to return to the peculiarities presented by religious language when it is considered as a form of fact-asserting statement, if one is not prepared to accept that the kind of alternative presented by Braithwaite and Phillips is sufficiently continuous with the way the vast majority of believers have thought that they were using that language. What needs to be brought out is the kind of relationships that must exist between it and other uses of language. One example of this is the work of Ian T. Ramsey (1915-1972), who was the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford from 1951 until his appointment as the Bishop of Durham in 1966. His 1957 book, *Religious Language*<sup>1</sup>, was one of the first theological attempts to deal with the challenges raised by the new attention on the meaningfulness of language. At the outset of the book, Ramsey claimed that "the contemporary philosophical interest in language, far from being soul-destroying, can be so developed as to provide a novel inroad into the problems and controversies of theology, illuminating its claims and reforming its apologetic"<sup>2</sup>. This was because it would force one to face the questions, "To what kind of situation does religion appeal? What kind of empirical anchorage have theological words?"<sup>3</sup>. Ramsey believed this 'anchorage' could be found by paying attention to the particular 'discernment', "without which no distinctive theology will ever be possible":-

... a 'self-awareness' that is more than 'body awareness' and not exhausted by spatio-temporal 'objects'. Such a discernment lies at the basis of religion, whose

characteristic claim is that there are situations which are spatio-temporal and more. Without such 'depth'; without this which is 'unseen', no religion will be possible; though of course for a developed theology much else is needed. But here is the bridge-head, the base, call it what we will.<sup>4</sup>

This discernment, according to Ramsey, leads one to identify as having particular significance those situations "where ... 'the penny drops', 'the ice breaks' - situations which 'come alive'"<sup>5</sup>. Ramsey insists such situations cannot be dismissed as the result of psychological factors, or as solely subjective experiences. For him, "all these situations, all these characteristically different situations, when they occur, have an *objective* reference and are, as all situations, *subject-object* in structure. When situations 'come alive', or 'the ice breaks', there is objective 'depth' in these situations along with and alongside any subjective changes"<sup>6</sup>.

It is through identifying the similarities between the situations where religious language is used, and these 'penny-dropping' situations in a 'secular' context that Ramsey believed the 'anchorage' could be found for religious language. This means that "(if) religious language has to talk about situations which bear great affinities to those we were discussing ... situations which are perceptual with a difference, perceptual and more, its language will be object language and more, i.e. object language which has very special qualifications, object language which exhibits logical peculiarities, logical impropriety"<sup>7</sup>. To support this, Ramsey developed the concept of a 'model', which "is a situation with which we are all familiar, and which can be used for reaching another situation with which we are not so familiar; one which, without the model, we should not recognize so easily"<sup>8</sup>. In the context of discussing what is meant by referring to God as 'first cause', Ramsey illustrates his position by giving an account of what is normally meant by 'cause':-

The word 'cause' ... specifies a particular situation. It starts us with this tree, or this piece of coal, or this human being, and puts them in a causal setting. We can think, for example, of this tree in relation to the acorn from which it came; or this tree as over a long period of time and under certain pressures becoming coal. Again we can think of this coal when it was a tree, and ... when it is burning and giving out heat. We can trace the causal development either way. With a human being we think at once of causal ancestors and causal successors. Here then we are given, by means of the word 'cause', specific straightforward pictures.<sup>9</sup>

How models differ in a religious context is through the use of a 'qualifier', in this example, 'first', and it acts as "a directive which prescribes a special way of developing those 'model' situations". With more mundane models of cause, the use of such a qualifier would mean that when presented with a tree, "we do not think of coal, but rather of a seed", and in the case of coal, "we do not think of fires but of prehistoric forests", etc. So 'first' here "presses us to move backward and still backward", but "because the causal story is such as can keep us going as long as anyone wishes", at the mundane level we would continue *ad infinitum*. However, there can come a point in "the pattern of terms and relations" that has been built up when "a characteristically different situation is evoked: a situation ... when the light dawns, the penny drops, the ice breaks":-

At that point there is a 'sense of the unseen', what is sometimes called 'a sense of mystery'. Here is something 'mysterious' which eludes the grasp of causal language. This is not 'mystery' that a further development of the causal story could eradicate ... if we are to do justice to theology there must be 'mystery' ... whereby a situation is 'mysterious' when it is what's seen, what's talked about in causal language, *and more*.<sup>10</sup>

So for Ramsey, certain kinds of models qualified in particular ways, so as to bring out the complex logical structure of the experiences they derive from, are when applied to the central religious term, 'God', able to give that term, "a certain logical placing". In this example, the model means that "(the) word 'God' is placed 'first' at the head of all causal stories, presiding over and uniting all causal expressions", so that "the word 'God' 'completes', and is logically prior to, all causal stories"<sup>11</sup>.

Ramsey continued to develop and refine these ideas throughout his career, so that for instance, the situations he had compared to when "the penny drops" become "cosmic disclosures" - "situations where the universe 'comes alive', where a 'dead', 'dull', 'flat' existence takes on 'depth' or another 'dimension'"<sup>12</sup>. However, the problem still remains that some could insist such experiences were only subjective, a purely psychological phenomena. Ramsey does claim that "the cosmic character of such a disclosure, because of its all-embracing range, because in it the whole universe confronts us", means that "we are entitled to speak of there being a single individuation expressing itself in each and all of these disclosures". He effectively

claims that because of the nature of the experience one would always identify it with "one x", though he admits that such disclosures do not bring "a privileged interpretation" with them, "any more than any other situation or experience"<sup>13</sup>. Yet despite this, he would still insist "that it is quite clear that cosmic disclosures are ontologically privileged in so far as they disclose that which confronts us as a basic 'given', that which is set over against ourselves in every situation of this kind, that which individuates the universe"<sup>14</sup>. However, it is still difficult to know from Ramsey's claim how the sceptic would be won over to accepting the possibility of this position, as Ramsey appears to be presenting such disclosures as self-authenticating, and it seems unless the sceptic had such a disclosure, there would be no reason for him or her to accept their existence, and if the sceptic did experience one, then he or she would apparently cease to be a sceptic. Ramsey is attempting to overcome the problems confronting religious language if it is taken to be referential in any way resembling normal, 'empirical' language, and so produces an account that does show how religious language could have a 'meaning' by being taken as a multitude of models, but it is unclear why the critic could not just say that Ramsey had failed to show why this language should be taken as being about what has traditionally been understood by God, when any meaningfulness it might have could be accounted for by these unusual 'disclosure' experiences. However, Ramsey's argument is another example of the way philosophers in trying to account for the meaningfulness of religious language have to acknowledge that such language is not just interrelated, but apparently dependent for its meaning on other more ordinary uses of language.

It is here that Ramsey's account could be supplemented by another Oxford philosopher, Ian Crombie. During the 'fifties, Crombie produced two essays dealing with the problem that religious language appeared to be too idiosyncratic to be accepted as fact-asserting. The first was collected in *New Essays* itself, and was published as an "afterword" to the "Theology and Falsification" symposium; while the second appeared in 1957 as part of a much less well known collection of essays, *Faith and Logic*, which also dealt with the problems raised for religious belief by analytic philosophy. This second volume represented the work of a group of philosophers and theologians at Oxford, who had been meeting together since the mid-forties, and had



called themselves "The Metaphysicals", to express their "common dissatisfaction with the restrictions which tacitly governed philosophical discussion at a time when 'metaphysical' was the rudest word in the philosopher's vocabulary", as they "wanted to be free to ask what questions we liked, even if some of them turned out to be 'ultimate questions' of an allegedly unanswerable and, indeed, unaskable sort"<sup>15</sup>. It appears that Ramsey had himself been associated with their meetings<sup>16</sup>, which is not surprising as it seems to have included most of the major figures in theology and philosophy of religion in Oxford at that time. Apart from Crombie and Ramsey, there were Basil Mitchell, the editor of *Faith and Logic*, who succeeded Ramsey as Nolloth Professor, and R.M. Hare, the future Professor of Moral Philosophy at the university, who was already well known for his development of a 'prescriptive' theory of ethics in reaction to the 'emotivist' theories previously espoused by analytic philosophers. These two had been the somewhat lacklustre respondents to Flew in the original "Theology and Falsification" symposium. However, the *doyens* of this discussion group seem to have been two very different figures - the first, who had convened the group in the first place, was the unreconstructed Thomist, E.L. Mascall (1905-1993), while the other was the reconstructed Thomist, Austin Farrer (1904-1968), who between them were probably the leading figures in mid-century Anglican divinity. Farrer himself contributed a couple of basically theological pieces to *Faith and Logic* that perhaps too obliquely addressed the concerns of analytic philosophers, while Mascall produced his own book on the topic, *Words and Images*<sup>17</sup>, which showed his usual facility, and rigidity to his own metaphysical inclinations, or rather what he understood as St.Thomas' own inclinations.

The interest of Crombie's contributions are that they clearly betray the influence not only of Ramsey, but also of Mascall's and Farrer's way of thinking about God, so that unlike many other contributions to the religious language debate, he was not only aware of Ramsey's 'contemporary' attempt to locate the meaningfulness of religious language, but was also influenced by the traditional understanding of religious language that had found classic expression in the work of Aquinas. This is what has usually been termed "analogical predication" - that the predicates used in sentences where God is the subject only have sense because they



are used in a way analogous to the way they are used in sentences about other subjects. In the past few decades, this has itself been the source of some debate, as it has been formerly assumed, at least since Cajetan's exposition of Aquinas, that this predication was only possible because of an *analogia entis* between God and His creatures, i.e. that such language could only be used about God and creation, because of some kind of relation of ontological proportionality between the former and the latter, which itself provided the foundation for the linguistic one. This was certainly the position defended by Mascall<sup>18</sup>, but it is precisely this assumption of a full blown metaphysical theory of analogy of being behind analogical predication that has now been questioned<sup>19</sup>. Perhaps the seminal account of this is in the volume of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* (*Quaestiones*, 1a, 12-13), where the editor, Herbert McCabe, O.P., claims of Aquinas, that for him, "analogy is not a way of getting to know about God, nor is it a theory of the structure of the universe, it is a comment on our use of certain words"<sup>20</sup>. The significance of Crombie is that his account of the nature of religious language, while based on understandings of analogical predication current at the time, does put it into a different terminology, which does not have the problem of Mascall's account of carrying around a doctrine of *analogia entis* as unnecessary metaphysical baggage, so that his work perhaps unintentionally accords with the newer interpretation of Aquinas, and brings it into contact with the concerns of the 'new revolution in philosophy'. He in effect produces a set of 'grammatical remarks' on the peculiarities of religious language, which are of use whether one accepts or rejects the apologetic arguments he incorporates with them about the credibility of the phenomena such language is supposedly referring to..

Crombie, in the two papers in question, approaches the problem of the way religious language looks when viewed from the perspective of other uses of language in a way that can supplement Ramsey's approach, as he highlights the way religious statements look like 'ordinary' fact-asserting statements, and on some occasions do the sorts of things they do, yet when pressed about the nature of what they are asserting, they end up asserting their predicates in a way totally removed from 'normal' fact-asserting discourse, in reference to a subject who behaves totally unlike any other. As Crombie says, it is difficult to see how on this basis what he terms the 'reference-

range' of such language could be fixed. However, his starting point is the claim that the "paradoxical features need not be regarded as demonstrating the impossibility of meaningful theological statements, but rather as contributing to a grasp of their meaning by giving a partial characterization of their subject". It is precisely such features that "make it clear ... these statements are made about no object which falls within our normal experience; and to learn something about the nature of religion", which is that such statements "if they are about anything, they are about a mystery"<sup>21</sup>, which was of course what Ramsey was using his talk of models to indicate as well. But as Ramsey perhaps did not sufficiently acknowledge, and which Crombie points out elsewhere, the difficulty with this is that it gives unbelievers the idea that "we deceive ourselves by a sort of conjuring trick, oscillating backwards and forwards between a literal interpretation of what we say when we say it, and a scornful rejection of such anthropomorphism when anybody challenges us":

Whatever symbolism we offer, we always insist that only a crude man would take it literally, and yet we never offer him anything but symbolism; deceived by our imagery into supposing that we have something in mind, in fact there is nothing on which we are prepared to take our stand.<sup>22</sup>

To overcome this impression, Crombie still believes some form of 'natural theology' is inevitable, so that it can be argued about "whether a sense of mystery seems to be the appropriate response to any part of our experience", which is precisely what Ramsey was hoping to persuade one to recognise with his ideas about 'disclosure' experiences. However, even if this is achieved, we can only have knowledge of such a mystery if "we believe ourselves to possess a revelation, that is to say a communication made in terms that we can understand". So, according to Crombie, "if we reflect on the kind of thing such a communication would have to be, we shall see why theological statements have the characteristics that they have, and how they are to be taken"<sup>23</sup>. So the peculiarities of religious language derive from the way that the mystery they are witnessing to can only be spoken of if we feel compelled to "the interpretation of certain objects and categories as a manifestation of the divine". This means that such events have to have a certain authority, so that the fact "what we say about God is said on authority ... is of the first importance in considering the significance of these statements", which for a Christian means in

Crombie's phrase, "the authority of Christ", and which might now be termed the authority of the narrative accounts about Christ accepted by the Church. For Crombie, it is through this authority that what we say about God locates its meaning, and avoids falling into the anthropomorphism or meaninglessness that the ambiguity of the language in this context would seem to demand. Crombie christens this kind of meaning 'parabolic', and is used to show that whatever language about God is, it cannot be directly descriptive, as language about other subjects can be:

What we do ... is in essence to think of God in parables. The things we say about God are said on the authority of the words and acts of Christ, who spoke in human language, using parable; and so we too speak of God in parable - authoritative parable, authorized parable; knowing that the truth is not literally that which our parables represent, knowing that now we see in a glass darkly, but trusting, because we trust the source of the parables, that in believing in them and interpreting in the light of each other, we shall not be misled, that we shall have such knowledge as we need to possess for the foundation of the religious life.<sup>24</sup>

Crombie recognises that this hardly makes religious language any more acceptable to the critic, because despite feeling entitled to speak about God in the form of parables, we still obviously cannot claim to be in any way able to know what we are supposed to be referring to:

Statements about God ... are in effect parables, which are referred, by means of the proper name 'God', out of our experience in a certain direction. We may ... by the process of whittling away ... try to tell ourselves what part of the meaning of our statements apply reasonably well, what part outrageously badly; but the fact remains that, in one important sense, when we speak about God, we do not know what we mean (that is, we do not know what that which we are talking about is like), and do not need to know, because we accept the images, which we employ, on authority. Because our concern with God is religious and not speculative ... because our need is, not to know what God is like, but to enter into relation with him, the authorized images serve our purpose. They belong to a type of discourse - parable - with which we are familiar, and therefore they have communication value, although in a sense they lack descriptive value.<sup>25</sup>

So Crombie acknowledges that we cannot specify the reference-range of statements which have God as their subject any more precisely than by saying they indicate something outside our normal experience "in a certain direction". So part of accepting

that such statements do have reference depends on "being willing to conceive the possibility of an object which is neither similar to, nor in any normal relation with, any spatial-temporal object"<sup>26</sup>. Here Crombie's position is obviously very similar to what Ramsey was trying to indicate with his 'disclosure' experiences, but it is what he brings out now that makes his account perhaps of more significance, if one is looking at religious language from the point of view of language-games, forms of life and 'family resemblance'.

The difference centres on Crombie's more succinct expression, than Ramsey managed with his talk of models, of the way that one is helped to see in which 'direction' one is supposed to be 'looking out' by looking at the relationships that exist between statements about God and other kinds of language, as while theological statements cannot be empirical generalizations or moral judgements, and must be a logically distinct category of statement, it still remains that "since the subject-matter of theological statements overlaps with the subject-matters about which empirical generalizations and moral judgements are made, theological statements are sensitive to, and have affinities and relationships with statements of other kinds"<sup>27</sup>. Crombie claims that looking at such affinities and relationships would show that religious discourse "is connected in this loose way, with ethics, cosmology, history, psychology", but that "it has nothing very direct to contribute to mathematics, literary criticism or marine biology"<sup>28</sup>. Here Crombie brings out points that Phillips obviously made in his work, and which seem to be inevitable on Wittgenstein's understanding of the importance of 'family resemblance' in the way language has meaning. It is also these "affinities and relationships" that provide what Crombie termed above the 'communication-value' for the 'parables' we use in our statements about God, as these parables of course talk of God in terms of human moral attributes, and so by giving such value help illuminating the direction that needs to be looked towards for the reference-range of the subject of such parables.

However, as Crombie points out, these attributes cannot be applied to God in the same sense as to ordinary subjects, because communication-value is normally dependent on the fact "that nobody can fully understand a statement unless he has a

fair idea how a situation about what is true would differ from a situation about what is false"<sup>29</sup>. This is of course the point of Flew's parable, whereas in the case of theological statements, the communication-value can only ever be 'parabolic', that is, if one tries "to step outside the parable, then we must admit that we do not know what the situation about which our parable is being told is like; we should only know if we could know God ... see, that is, the unfolding of the divine purposes in their entirety":

We do not know how what we call the divine wrath differs from the divine mercy (because we do not know how they respectively resemble human wrath and mercy); but we do know how what *we mean* when we talk about the wrath of God differs from what *we mean* when we talk about his mercy, because then we are within the parable, talking within the framework of admitted ignorance, in language which we accept because we trust its source.<sup>30</sup>

Crombie therefore admits that the parables used in theological statements are unlike any other use of parable, because for the others one knows how the parable is to 'applied' - we can step out of it, and translate it into another kind of statement. This is not possible with the parables in religious language, and so one is left to simply "believe that it does apply, and that we shall one day see how"<sup>31</sup>.

Yet Crombie is forced to accept that this parabolic content of predicates must be based on an analogical relationship between the human and divine use of such predicates as 'love' if they are to have any communication value. Yet Crombie is explicit that this is not a metaphysical theory he is propounding:

... although we *believe in* the analogy, we do not *use* the analogy to give a sense to 'love' in the theological sense. We postulate the analogy because we believe the image to be a faithful image. The sense the words bear within the image or parable is drawn from thoughtful experience of human life.

Because of this, while insisting that theological statements are in no way empirical hypotheses such as one finds in scientific disciplines, Crombie does claim that they must have the "formal property" whereby "facts of experience can count as objections to them", because he insists that the predicates used about God cannot have special "theological senses" preserved inviolate from the way they are used in other statements. If this was so, then the predicates in theological statements would be meaningless, because there would be "no means of teaching the situation-ranges with



which the special senses were to be correlated", and so as the predicates must therefore "bear their ordinary sense, we do know what constitutes an objection to them":

Thus the theist cannot simply ignore the fact of suffering when asserting God's love. Suffering ... is not in itself an objection, but utterly and irredeemably pointless suffering would be; the Christian therefore is committed to believing that there is no such thing. Because he must believe this, his faith will be continually tortured by what he sees around him, and in the process of torture his faith should be purified and his understanding deepened ... This is only possible because we know what the words in the predicates of theological statements mean, and this we know because we take these statements as human images of divine truths.<sup>32</sup>

To this end, Crombie had already developed a form of the eschatological verification argument<sup>33</sup>, whereby the ambiguities in determining the meaning of what is supposed to be asserted in theological statements would be overcome in an "after-life", where some of these ambiguities would be removed through unambiguous contact with the "subject" of what is being asserted. However, Crombie's account has the advantage over Hick's in that he seems to be far more aware of not just the ambiguity, but also the complexity of what religious statements are attempting to achieve. While Phillips would doubtless claim Crombie has turned religious language into a variant of an empirical hypothesis by this claim, it still seems the case that what Crombie is trying to come to terms with here is far closer to Christian tradition, than what results from Phillips' attempts to preserve the meaningfulness of religious language.

Crombie's description of the nature of statements about God then accords with Hick in his view of what would happen in any attempt to isolate religion in its own language-game or form of life and make it logically inviolable. Without some kind of interaction with the other discourses around it, and so with the living, acting human beings who made all such discourses possible, religious language would be nothing more than a curious linguistic game constructing sentences with the word 'God' in, because it is only through interaction with other discourses that the parables used about God acquire their communication value, and through that, Crombie hopes, their reference-range. However, Crombie still has no alternative but to accept that while such statements are meant to be fact-asserting, the facts they assert can only be

regarded as very peculiar indeed, so that it must be admitted by the believer that the critic is justified in thinking "that the religious man supposes himself to know what he means by his statements only because, until challenged, he interprets them anthropomorphically", but "when challenged, however, he retreats rapidly backwards towards complete agnosticism". Except, however, Crombie would add two qualifications. The first is that the believer should not "suppose himself to know what he means by his statements ... he knows what his statements mean within the parable, and believes that they are the right statements to use", and so must accept that theology can only be an "art of enlightened ignorance"; while the second is that it is not a totally complete agnosticism the believer is forced back onto, as "the Christian, under attack, falls back not in any direction, but in one direction; he falls back upon the person of Christ, and the concrete realities of the Christian life"<sup>34</sup>.

What is of especial value in Crombie's account of religious language is the distinction he makes between reference-range and communication value to help express the peculiarities that it has. Ramsey was attempting something similar in his talk of 'disclosure' experiences, which are obviously attempts to indicate the kind of direction one must look in to find the reference that religious language has, and the models that grow from such experiences are the way that such language had its communication value, by developing qualified forms of ordinary language. Crombie's terminology is perhaps more useful, as it enables one to see with greater clarity that it is only through religious language having some kind of communication value, because of the way its meaning is derived from interacting with other uses of language, that we can come to any idea of what such language's reference-range might be. The significance of Crombie's work can be seen in the seriousness with which Nielsen takes it, as advances a thorough critique of Crombie's position on communication value in his book, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Nielsen obviously took issue with Crombie's account of how such language has reference-range through the way our experience can give "a hint of the possibility of something we cannot conceive, but which lies outside the range of possible conception in a determinate direction"<sup>35</sup>. In his *Faith and Logic* essay, Crombie did this by dealing with those concepts which are applicable to human beings, but which are not

applicable to the description of the material world (i.e. loving, feeling, hoping, etc.), and which he suggested indicate a 'duality' in human nature that is not present elsewhere, and which cannot be explained in any other way.

It was especially these concepts that he argued could be used to give validity to a communication value for God, and so through that specify a reference range. For instance, he argued that some meaning can be given to talk of God as 'spirit', because through "our limited and imperfect spirituality - the fact that we are not spirits, but beings with a spiritual aspect", this "leads us to think of beings who are perfectly what we are imperfectly; not that we can properly conceive of such beings, but that we are forced to frame the abstract notion of them, by the feeling that the smattering of spirit which we find in ourselves must be a pointer to a pool from which it comes"<sup>36</sup>. Crombie recognises the obvious criticism that such metaphysical speculation can be taken as reifying abstractions, because the noun 'spirit' can be argued to only exist as an abstraction of the adjective 'spiritual'; while the latter could only acquire meaning "by correlation with thinking and other activities which only occur, in our experience, as activities of human beings", so "(surely) it must be a category-mistake to use the word 'spirit' as anything but an abstract noun, or aspect word?" However, Crombie claims the word is used "in the theological context", by a deliberate commission of a category mistake under the pressure of convictions which require us to depart from normal language-practice in this way". In the case of taking the notion of 'greenness' as the name of a substance common to all green objects, Crombie claims this would indeed be the result of people "being subjected to philosophical reasoning", and under pressure deriving the idea "from (mistaken) logical theory", but the notion of God as 'spirit' is different, because the category-mistake would be "deliberately committed to express what we antecedently feel; and, if we antecedently feel something, the category-transgression we deliberately commit to express that feeling has some meaning - that, namely, which it is designed to express". Crombie claims this could only be ruled out as logically impossible if it could be shown "that there can never be good reasons for committing category-transgressions" and if "there can be no 'meanings' which do not correspond to clear and distinct ideas"<sup>37</sup>.

So Crombie is forced into the position that language about God could only have communication value if one accepts that it has to involve a conscious 'category transgression'. It is this that Nielsen takes issue with, as at the beginning of *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Nielsen introduced a distinction very similar to Crombie's talk about oscillation between anthropomorphism and agnosticism, when he talked about the distinction between an anthropomorphic and a non-anthropomorphic God. Drawing on a paper by Paul Edwards<sup>38</sup>, he claimed that religious language was only 'intelligible' when it is used anthropomorphically, as it can be said to be verifiable then, because it is equivalent to other fact-asserting language - but this means it can only be shown to be wrong, even by believers' own standards; while when religious language is presented as being non-anthropomorphic, it ceases to be intelligible as it cannot be verified, as it can then no longer be taken as in any way equivalent to fact-asserting language. For Nielsen, Crombie's talk of oscillating back and forth becomes nothing more than a confusion. When God "is construed anthropomorphically, 'loving' is used with some intelligibility, for given such an anthropomorphic employment of 'God', we have somewhere in the background a picture of God as in some mysterious way having a body", which "makes it possible to conceptualise Him as acting in the world and to think of Him as loving"<sup>39</sup>. However, believers are of course not prepared to accept this picture if it is advanced explicitly:

It could only be a joke to ask how tall God is, how much He weighs or where He comes to an end. A whole range of conditions associated with something said to possess some kind of gigantic body are not associated with 'God' as the plain man uses that term. God ... could not be any kind of material object, no matter how huge for this would limit Him and subject Him to the conditions of change and corruption; only a completely disembodied Creator could be an object *worthy* of worship.<sup>40</sup>

However, according to Nielsen (and Edwards), believers only find this non-anthropomorphic language intelligible, because "when people are praying or worshipping, their childhood pictorial images of God as a material being unwittingly reassert themselves and in that way 'loving' comes to have an application when applied to God". So it is only because of an unconscious sleight of hand that all talk of God, for instance, in terms of 'Pure Spirit' appears to have meaning, because "we cannot understand what it would be for such a being to act and thus to be loving,



merciful or just, for these predicates apply to things that *a person does*. But we have no understanding of 'a person' without 'a body' and it is only persons that in the last analysis can act or do things"<sup>41</sup>.

Nielsen probably weakens his position by arguing that one could only knowingly indulge in the category transgressions needed to give communication value to religious language because of the unconscious assertion of 'infantile' factors. He focuses on Crombie's admittance that talk of 'spirit' is not derived from mistakes in logical theory, but "results from an attempt to express what we antecedently but obscurely feel", and seizes on Crombie's admittance that what one often feels in such cases is that "(we), or at least some of us sometimes, no doubt do *not* feel 'at home' in our world; the contemporary world as well as the not so contemporary world has been a place where men have frequently experienced estrangement". Nielsen claims this leads people to "dream of some perfect isle where there is no death, no hate, no feeling of not belonging, and so on". Returning to his distinction between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic, he remarks that "(here) another world is intelligible though fanciful, just as anthropomorphic gods are intelligible", and that it is this fanciful 'blessed isle' that serves "as our model of 'the spiritual world, to which we really belong'":

We can understand what it is to talk of blessed isles, but we do not understand what it is to talk of a non-spatiotemporal world ... What we believe in, if we were to believe in such anthropomorphic spiritualities, is intelligible enough; it is just gross superstition. To avoid superstition, but to preserve belief, we abstract once too often and get a concept of 'Spirit' and 'a non-spatiotemporal being' that is devoid of sense; but when we engage in our characteristic religious activities, the old anthropomorphic picture reasserts itself and our words do have an intelligible use. We unwittingly shuttle back and forth between these two contexts and easily but conveniently conceal from ourselves that we do not understand what we are talking about."<sup>42</sup>

Nielsen is therefore claiming that while the believer may think he or she is well aware of what is going on in the language being used about God in fact he or she is merely being held captive by "an anthropomorphic but intelligible picture ... which we carry along, but we can't get behind it or beyond it". For instance, Crombie had claimed that part of why some people used religious language was because they had an



"intellectual dissatisfaction with the notion of this universe as a complete system"<sup>43</sup>, and so had come to see God as something that was not contained by the finitude and contingency that lay behind their dissatisfaction with the idea of a self-sufficient universe. Instead Nielsen insists that it is only because of our "anthropomorphic but intelligible picture" of God as a creator in relation to His creation in the same way a human being is in relation to what he or she makes, that we feel this dissatisfaction with the universe as a "complete system", and so that it is in reality not an intellectual dissatisfaction we are feeling:

It only strikes us, or strikes some of us in certain moods, as a rational, literal question because we have an emotional investment, resulting from powerful early conditioning, in so talking about the universe. We should not speak here ... of an intellectual dissatisfaction, but of an emotional one born of our natural infant helplessness and our early indoctrination<sup>44</sup>.

While Nielsen may be unacademically brusque here with his opponents, he does have a point. All sides accept that religious language does involve what Crombie termed category transgressions, but if it is to have 'meaning' or communication value, then it must still have some kind of family resemblance with other related uses of language. As Nielsen insists, this resemblance must be able to show its 'compatibility' with these other uses, or else it will be difficult to know what could stop it being considered the product of personal and social psychological factors, forcing people into nonsensical uses of language. Nielsen's position is also made more complex, because in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, he explicitly rejects the kind of empirical foundationalism that appeared to be behind his early criticism of Wittgensteinian Fideism, and which could seem to lie behind the somewhat arrogant claims made above. Instead he claims that his own philosophical method is Wittgensteinian, in that he agrees that "logic is no ideal language which gives 'the real logical form' of either our everyday or scientific statements", and that Wittgenstein's criticisms in his *Philosophical Investigations* "of any variety of logical atomism or any kindred approach seem to me devastating"<sup>45</sup>. But crucially he goes on to call himself only "inconsistently Wittgensteinian", because he still wishes to insist "that some types of discourse are not correct usage, and if no Wittgensteinian could consistently assert that, then I am no Wittgensteinian ... Ordinary usage is only sometimes in order as

it is"<sup>46</sup>. Nielsen goes on to insist that this does not lead him to any "logical atomistic theory of logical constructions or ideal language method", but to claim that "when we reflect on our various linguistic activities, we find, when it comes to talking about what there is, that some of these activities are epistemologically more fundamental than others"<sup>47</sup>.

What Nielsen is trying to get at here is that if religious language is truly to be considered fact-asserting, and presumably those who do not take Braithwaite's or Phillips' option of claiming the true use of religious statements is something else, would accept that its primary purpose is to tell us something about God - no matter how bizarre a 'fact' He may be or how peculiar the 'something' - then religious statements must have a 'family resemblance' to other kinds of statements that are fact-asserting, if they are to have a communication value and reference range as Crombie considered they must. Nielsen's point is that it does seem to be perfectly acceptable therefore for someone to ask how exactly our use of language in speaking about God does overlap with how we speak about more mundane subjects, and whether the overlap is actually strong enough to bear the claim of 'family resemblance' that is put upon it. After all, Crombie, in his account of religious language, insisted that there was no "special theological sense" involved in the parabolic language used about God. He instead argued that if religious language had communication value, it was because it took over this value from the way such language was used in ordinary 'situation-ranges', and it was just accepted that these were inadequate "human images of divine truths". However, is Nielsen still not justified in pointing out how differently religious language does function, and whether one is therefore not entitled to ask whether it can seriously be taken as asserting anything, as the category transgression has gone so far as to undermine any resemblance?

As far as Nielsen is concerned he is not trying to reintroduce any metaphysical claims by the back door, because all he wants to ask is to ask "why is it not possible for philosophical analysis to point out that certain claims are *non sequiturs*, that certain claims are contradictory, or that certain alleged claims are without truth-conditions, while purporting to have truth-conditions? ":

... surely a little logic won't hurt, and a sharpened understanding of the concepts of truth, fact and meaning may not hurt either. Indeed these concepts, like the concept of reality, may be systematically ambiguous; this would mean that their meanings are *partially* idiosyncratic to specific forms of life. But this would only establish a partial idiosyncrasy. We say 'There is butter on the toast', ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ', and 'They ought not to kill children' are all true. What makes them true is surely very different; the criteria for truth in these different cases are not the same. Yet there is something in common here too: in order for us properly to say of any of them that they are true, they must be statements made on determinate occasions, they must have the highest sort of warrant available for such statements ... Moreover, if a statement of any sort is true, it is to be expected that, under optimal conditions (conditions of undistorted communication), rational, informed and reflective people will assent to it. These features cut across the statement type in question.<sup>48</sup>

Nielsen has already argued that what appears to distinguish all other fact-asserting discourse from language about God is precisely the point the Flew parable and the entire tradition behind it made - that religious language does not appear to be in principle confirmable or disconfirmable. Of course both Hick and Crombie claim that at an eschatological level, it will be, but all the critic need do is point out that all other forms of fact-asserting discourse seem to be in principle confirmable or disconfirmable *here and now*. As Nielsen says, religious statements "parade as factual statements, but actually do not function in this very crucial sense (of confirmability/disconfirmability), like statements that would, with no question at all, pass muster as statements of fact"<sup>49</sup>. It could be said that here Nielsen is making 'grammatical remarks' about the 'family resemblances' of fact-asserting statements, so that suggesting "confirmability/disconfirmability in principle" is not to make "an arbitrary entrance requirement", as it merely "brings out the procedures which are actually employed in deciding whether a statement is indeed factual". Such a requirement can then "be used in deciding on borderline and disputed cases":

Where certain utterances are allegedly bits of fact-stating discourse yet function in a radically different way than our paradigms of fact-stating discourse, we have good grounds for questioning their factual intelligibility.<sup>50</sup>

So for Nielsen, it could be said that if religious language wished to satisfy the question of whether its status as fact-asserting had sufficient family resemblance to

other uses of that kind, it would still need to acknowledge the applicability of "confirmability/disconfirmability in principle". This means that the importance of what he calls the 'paradigms' of fact-stating discourse - the ordinary, everyday ways in which human beings assert something as factual, is that they provide a basic criterion of what is to be taken as fact-asserting, and so they can be characterised as "epistemologically more fundamental". This means that such usages are "the ones that are culturally universal and essential for all understanding ... Every tribe plays that language-game"<sup>51</sup>. A similar argument had appeared in the "Wittgensteinian Fideism" paper, where he discussed the difficulties arising from the claim that 'science' and 'religion' were logically incommensurate modes of discourse, as he pointed out that contrary to some claims, talking about having a 'true link' with an 'independent reality' did not mean that one was talking within a scientific mode of discourse. The point Nielsen was trying to make there and his later book is that some kind of talk of this kind transcends any particular 'specialist' mode of discourse:

When a plain man looks at the harvest moon and says that it is orange, or says that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, or that his vineyard posts are solid, he is not making scientific statements, but he is not making *subjective* statements either. His statements can be perfectly objective; they can be about how things are, and they can be objectively testable (publically verifiable) without being scientific or without conflicting with science.<sup>52</sup>

It is precisely this kind of 'non-subjective' statements asserting 'objectively testable' facts that he believes, because it is part of the way of speaking of every human group has the right to be taken as the standard by which all other allegedly fact-asserting discourse should be judged:

... when we reflect on the various 'forms of life' - the various linguistic activities that we actually engage in - we will find that some are 'ground floor', that is, determinative of what can be seen, after a careful reflection on one's language, as constitutive of or at least as an irreducible element in talk of what there is. The other forms of discourse are in various ways parasitic on it and if in trying to assert the existence of something we make assumptions which run counter to it, we say something which is incoherent.<sup>53</sup>

This does appear to be a much more nuanced account of the incoherence of religious language than that calling for some kind of Archimedean point from which to judge the status of all modes of discourse and Nielsen would seem to be correct in his

estimate that "this is hardly what philosophers such as Quine, Sellars and Rorty have characterised and criticised as foundationalism"<sup>54</sup>.

His basic point could be re-expressed in rather more Wittgensteinian terms by saying that if one looks at non-controversial fact-asserting statements, one would come to appreciate what the family resemblances were between them. This would enable one to go on and ask whether religious statements could really be said to have enough of those resemblances to qualify as being related, because they appeared to miss one 'resemblance' that actually did seem to be common to all the others. This is the condition that all fact-asserting statements common to all manner of human groups have, whereby they are confirmable or disconfirmable in principle (in this life). It seems that Nielsen is still justified in asking how can believers claim the language they use is factually meaningful, when it seems to be so unlike all the other uses of language it is supposed to resemble. The challenge he makes towards the end of *An Introduction*, while it would not be accepted by Wittgenstein as being any of philosophy's business, seems to be not actually ruled out by the method of philosophy Wittgenstein developed with his talk of language-games and forms of life, and so despite the confidence of some that Flew's parable had been laid to rest by such a philosophy, it may still be that Nielsen can present believers with a relevant question here:

... can we give a case of a statement whose factual status is accepted by all parties as quite *unproblematic* which is not at least confirmable or disconfirmable in principle? ... And if we cannot does this not at least give some *prima-facie* plausibility to the contention that a statement to be *factual* must be at least confirmable or disconfirmable in principle?<sup>55</sup>

If one returns to Crombie's terminology about communication value and reference range, Nielsen's argument is pointing out that believers have committed themselves to the claim that if communication value is to be accorded to religious language, it must have in Wittgenstein's term, family resemblances to other kinds of language, and that one of these kinds is fact-asserting language, so part of the resemblance religious language has must partly be resemblance to fact-asserting language, and so this resemblance, if religious language is to be taken as fact-asserting



itself, cannot be completely undermined by the category transgressions that are usually involved in religious language. If this happens the precarious oscillation between agnosticism and anthropomorphism is broken, and one is left with either superstition or silence, and the attempt to give religious language communication value has failed. Nielsen's argument of course is that one resemblance common to all kinds of fact-asserting statements is that it is in principle confirmable or disconfirmable, and that the category transgressions in religious language have actually made this impossible. This means that as the communication value in religious language derives from its oscillation to and from similarity with fact-asserting statements, one is inevitably lead back to what Crombie termed the reference range, and all the problems raised by empiricism about how religious language is supposed to refer. This means that one cannot avoid the problem raised by the Wisdom/Flew parable - if nothing 'empirical' happens to give one some idea of the direction one is supposed to be looking in, then how can one ever be sure religious language does have 'meaning'?

So while Crombie's account is significant in distinguishing between communication value and reference range in fact-asserting language and the role they play in religious language, it may be that part of the holistic vision that Wittgenstein's philosophy leads one to is the recognition that communication value - what some form of language is trying to communicate - cannot be separated from reference range - what the language is supposed to be referring to, and that if language is supposed to be 'meaningful' in relation to some reality beyond itself, then the kind of problems put forward by the Wisdom/Flew parable are inescapable. A similar position seems to have been reached in one of the few studies of the nature of religious language produced in the 1980s - Janet Martin Soskice's *Metaphor and Religious Language*<sup>56</sup>. She adopts the viewpoint that the best way to describe religious language is by looking at it as metaphorical. She acknowledges that as a way for the theologian to go, it is "a most difficult and compelling one", as "on the one hand, they must acknowledge ... that the metaphors which concern them are allusive and embedded in particular traditions of interpretation and belief, and, on the other hand, they must argue that this effective element is not the whole, that somehow this language can claim to be descriptive of a God who cannot be named in tropes and figures"<sup>57</sup>. Her book explores

this problem from the perspective of what literary criticism, both ancient and modern, has had to say about metaphor, but in many ways what she is saying was the point that Crombie wanted to make with his talk of religious language as 'parabolic'. However this language may be described, part of the problem for Soskice is that "Christianity's reliance on metaphor has increasingly come to be regarded as a liability", as while "critics have no objection to the occasional metaphor, what disturbs them is that, when speaking of God, Christians move from one metaphor to the next, always indicating that their comments must be qualified, yet never speaking in a strictly straightforward way. The critic argues that at some point the Christian must break out of this circle of imagery and speak unequivocally of God, for otherwise we cannot know that his utterances have any sense at all"<sup>58</sup>. This is the same attitude that laid behind Nielsen's unwillingness to accept that religious language could just be left to verge between anthropomorphism and agnosticism as the situation dictated.

Soskice claims in the book to be defending "theological realism", which could probably be identified with what has been described in these chapters as the attempt to preserve the 'fact-asserting' nature of religious language, while recognising that the 'fact' in question seems overwhelmingly different from the kinds of facts asserted in empirical propositions. However, she stresses that "it is not our object to prove the existence of God, still less to prove that the models and metaphors which Christians use in speaking of God have a special validity", instead her concern is "with conceptual possibility rather than proof, and with a demonstration that we may justly claim to speak of God without claiming to define him, and to do so by means of metaphor. Realism accommodates figurative speech which is reality depicting without claiming to be directly descriptive"<sup>59</sup>. However, one may wonder how far one can demonstrate this conceptual possibility without going some way in showing how one may break out of the circle of metaphorical images. Soskice returns to this problem by quoting a passage from an essay by Ronald W. Hepburn in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*:-

The question which should be of greatest concern to the theologian is not whether this or that myth may be re-expressed in language less flagrantly pictorial, more abstract in appearance, but whether or not the circle of myth, metaphor and symbol is a closed one: and if closed then in what way propositions about God manage to *refer*.<sup>60</sup>

Soskice accepts that this represents "an extremely radical criticism, not simply of metaphor, but of any claim to speak of God", because "what he is asking for here is not a proof but an account of how any finite and figurative speaking can ever claim to refer to a transcendent Deity", and for Soskice, Hepburn is pointing out that it often appears "the theist can *only* claim to refer to God at the cost of making God finite, of making Him a thing amongst the things whose qualities we delimit and describe", which is of course what Phillips always claimed was the problem in traditional philosophy of religion, though he curiously solved it by dispensing with God in any traditional form. However, Soskice then tries to get out of this problem by claiming that "Hepburn seems prey to the bogey that reference must involve unrevisable or exhaustive description", and instead insisting that the theist "can coherently claim that his language is referential or ... reality depicting, without claim to definitive knowledge":-

We are not, of course, saying that the 'objects' of a theological study can also be the objects of a scientific theory; nor are we arguing that the theist is right in any of his claims about the Divine Other and his relationship to man. Rather, we are saying that the theist can reasonably take his talk of God, bound as it is within a wheel of images, as being reality depicting, while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacy as description.<sup>61</sup>

Soskice therefore seems to sidestep the issue, as it does not seem that one can really overcome the problem of reference by equating this problem with a demand for the kind of definition that is impossible in religious language, precisely because of the kind of language it is. Hepburn's point, that Soskice recognises but edges around, is precisely that raised above - how can one ever hope to give a reference range to God when the language that is supposed to help illuminate this range does so by being dependent for its communication value on other language that seems unable to accommodate this particular alleged referent without contradicting its usual norms of meaningfulness, as to what qualifies as a referent.

So in conclusion Wittgenstein's understanding of family resemblance implying as it does interaction and interrelationship between all forms of fact-asserting language means that religious language if it is not to take Phillips' option, has to account for why it does not seem to fulfil the resemblance of confirmability/disconfirmability that

Nielsen had claimed was to be found in all the other uses of fact-asserting language. This also means that while the concepts of communication value and reference range need to be distinguished, it has also to be acknowledged that in fact-asserting language, if that language is to be meaningful, then the two concepts have to be kept interrelated, because any communication value is inevitably dependent on referential claims. However, even if communication value could be kept completely distinguishable from the problems about reference range raised by the empiricist critique, Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance also leads to the meaning of predicates being found in their myriad different relationships between the situations in which they are used. For instance, Flew ended his account of the Invisible Gardener parable by pointing out that "there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding ... 'God does not really love us'". He drew attention to the way believers talk about the predicate 'love' in relation to God - "Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern"<sup>62</sup>. These could be taken as 'grammatical remarks', as they point out that the way the predicate 'love' is used in one context is dependent for its communication value on the way the predicate is used to describe particular forms of human behaviour. The point Flew is making is that what is said about God's love appears to become so qualified that any family resemblance it needs to remain meaningful with the other talk about love becomes threatened. So the communication value of such predicates is undermined by the way their use here needs to resemble their use elsewhere if the terms are to remain meaningful, but there inevitably comes a point in their use when this meaningfulness is threatened as they continue being qualified until the category transgressions they inevitably involve as religious language end up becoming too great, and the predicates oscillate out of control into meaninglessness.

It seems therefore that Wittgenstein's vision of family resemblance as the myriad threads running through propositions and helping to tie the varied uses of a particular term together can also be used in this interpretation to reinforce difficulties



empiricism raised about securing a 'stable' foundation for religious language. It depends for its meaningfulness on its interaction and interrelationship with other forms of language and the way human beings behave, yet at the same time its dissimilarities which are considered essential if the true transcendental nature of God is to be preserved, threaten to make it meaningless as it appears its resemblance to other language could snap. Wittgenstein himself seems to have recognised this problem, but he did not believe that it was philosophy's concern to adjudicate whether the resemblance had been stretched so much as to make it 'shapeless', and therefore threaten to render asunder the balance between anthropomorphism and agnosticism, and reduce what religious language was trying to communicate either to meaninglessness or complete uncertainty. Instead Wittgenstein seems to have believed that philosophy could do no more than present these similarities and differences in religious language, so contenting itself with only bringing out the oddity of it. It may not be too far-fetched to speculate that all such 'existential' decisions were seen by Wittgenstein as simply too complex to be adequately dealt with by philosophy, as the response one gave to the question of whether there was a God or not would be dependent upon the entire complexity of one's life, and the multifarious interactions it had with other human beings and the rest of its environment, and that philosophy could never therefore be able to deal with all the factors, linguistic and non-linguistic, that could form one's life and lead one to religious belief. For some, the acceptance of the peculiarities involved in religious language would be too much, because they would simply not 'resonate' sufficiently with their own lives, and the category transgressions involved in such language would be unsupportable, but for others, whose lives had been formed in a different way, such peculiarities would not be too great to bear, even if it meant the continual tension involved in trying to assert 'something' about a 'reality' that was incomparable to any other, and for whom all our 'normal' language was inadequate, but which was the only language that could be used.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> S.C.M. Press, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 11.



<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ian T. Ramsey, "Talking of God: Models, Ancient and Modern" in *Christian Empiricism*, ed. Jerry H. Gill, Sheldon Press 1974, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* pp. 130-131.

<sup>15</sup> Basil Mitchell ed., *Faith and Logic: Oxford Essays in Philosophical Theology*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1957, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey is acknowledged in the introduction as one of "the past or present members who have taken part in its discussions or helped with their criticism", *ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Longmans, Green & Co. 1957.

<sup>18</sup> In such books as *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism*, Longmans 1943, and *Existence and Analogy*, Longmans 1949.

<sup>19</sup> For instance in the essays by Nicholas Lash ("Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy", pp. 68-94) and Roger White ("Notes on Analogical Predication and Speaking about God", pp. 197-226) in Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland ed., *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, Cambridge University Press 1982.

<sup>20</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 3 (1 a, 12-13): *Knowing and Naming God*, ed. & trans. Herbert McCabe O.P., Blackfriars/Eyre & Spottiswoode 1964, p.106.

McCabe goes on to argue that analogy was introduced as a way "to maintain that we can use words to mean more than they mean to us - that we can use words to 'try to mean' what God is like, that we can reach out to God with our words even though they do not circumscribe what he is". It could be objected that in, for instance, a sentence like "God is good", "'good' must either mean the same as it means when applied to creatures or something different":

It means the same, then God is reduced to the level of creatures; if it does not mean the same then we cannot know what it means by knowing about creatures, we should have to understand God himself; but we do not, hence we do not understand it at all - we only have an illusion of understanding because the word happens to be graphically the same as the 'good' we do understand. (p. 106)

According to McCabe, Aquinas' talk about analogy is meant to overcome this either-or situation, by illustrating that it is too simplistic to insist "a word must mean either exactly the same in two different uses or else mean something altogether different", so leaving open "the possibility of a word being used with related meanings" (ibid.). So in the case of 'good', "since there are in any case many ways of being good amongst creatures, there is nothing incongruous in saying 'He is good, but not in our way" (p. 107).

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell *op.cit.* p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell *op.cit.* p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* pp. 122-123.

<sup>25</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p.124.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell *op.cit.* p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell *op.cit.* p. 58

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* pp. 60-61.

<sup>38</sup> "Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology" in Sidney Hook ed., *Religious Experience and Truth*, Oliver and Boyd 1962.

<sup>39</sup> Nielsen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 35-36.

- <sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 36.
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.* pp. 154-155.
- <sup>43</sup> Mitchell *op.cit.* p. 65.
- <sup>44</sup> Nielsen, *An Introduction, op.cit.* p. 158.
- <sup>45</sup> Nielsen, *An Introduction*, p. 125.
- <sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 134.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.
- <sup>50</sup> *ibid.* pp. 41-42.
- <sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 135.
- <sup>52</sup> "Wittgensteinian Fideism" *op.cit.* p. 202
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 135.
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid.* - the two other philosophers named are the Americans, Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty, who have also written in criticism of foundationalism, though for rather different reasons to each other - for Sellars, see "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind" in his *Science, Perception and Reality*, Humanities Press 1963, and Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press 1979.
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 182.
- <sup>56</sup> Clarendon Press 1985.
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p.ix.
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid.* pp. ix-x.
- <sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p. 148.
- <sup>60</sup> Ronald W. Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity" in Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 237.
- <sup>61</sup> Soskice *op.cit.* p. 141.
- <sup>62</sup> Flew and MacIntyre *op.cit.* p. 99.

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